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The preservation of memory: Institutional contexts of oral history

Oral history, or the structured interview of a historical narrator, is a form of history that gives voice to regular people both literally and figuratively. The written historical record has typically privileged powerful, literate populations, whether men, white people, the rich, or a combination of all three. Recording history through audio and audiovisual documents can fill gaps in the historical record by consciously soliciting narratives from underrepresented voices. In the process, historians connect directly with living sources, leading scholars like Paul Thompson to refigure the oral historian as a “field-worker.”¹ But what happens to the fieldwork once it is accessioned into institutions? Oral histories lie somewhere between grassroots community memory and traditional academic history; so, too, do the approaches of the repositories that collect them. Archives, public libraries, and special collections each preserve and make accessible oral histories, but this process looks very different according to institutional policies and audiences. This paper scratches the surface of those differences by surveying four New York City-based oral history repositories: Queens Memory, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, and the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives.

Issues in oral history

The term “oral history” can refer to both the practice of recording first-person oral testimony about the past, typically covering a subject’s entire life, and the actual document (audio or video) that results.² This paper is largely concerned with the documents, though a brief overview of the field of each repository is closely connected with an active oral history-making initiative. The field of oral history in its modern form has been considered to begin with Allan Nevins’s work at Columbia University in the 1940s, and draws upon, though is distinct from, the oral tradition passed down in families and communities.³ Oral history gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s concurrent with a trend in academic history of writing history “from the ground up,” combined with ever-lower costs of portable audio recording equipment.⁴ Since then, oral histories have provided a valuable new base on which to construct social histories, as well as a way to bridge the gap between the formal study of history and a vernacular storytelling accessible to all listeners.⁵

¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

² “Principles and Best Practices,” The Oral History Association, Oct. 2009, accessed 8 April 2018, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/#best>

³ Thompson, viii.

⁴ “What Is Oral History?,” *History Matters*, George Mason University, accessed 20 April 2018, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/what.html>

⁵ Linda Shopes, “Making Sense of Oral History,” *Oral History in the Digital Age*, Michigan State University, <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/making-sense-of-oral-history/>

At its best, oral history upends the collective memory constructed through textual documents. Traditional history relies on the interpretation of written records and testimony. Such documents were largely maintained by those in power, and therefore concern themselves mostly with political administration. Such a system favors the experiences of affluent white men, who were literate, won fame, and whose papers were considered “official” in disproportionate numbers.⁶ The practice of oral history allows for far more agency by oral historians, who can elicit accounts of the past from any individual still living who experienced it. Rather than relying on records being created and passed down in a society that still favors the official and governmental, a practitioner of oral history helps create the record of ordinary people through the interview process.⁷ Oral history as a discipline crystalizes a broader history of challenges to the academic discipline of history, forcing a reckoning with history as multifaceted and complex and shifting the focus of that history from bureaucrats to the poor, employers to laborers, and public men to private women.⁸

Much as the field of oral history has widened the pool of sources of history, it has also widened the pool of historians. Oral history interviews may be conducted by oral historians, who are scholars trained in the best practices and ethical principles of oral history, or by trained or untrained laypeople. In a purely technological sense, the low cost and widespread availability of the portable tape recorder has helped democratize the practice of history.⁹ However, a successful interview sometimes depends on an interviewer who is a member of the same group (e.g. demographic, professional) as the subject; such an interviewer, even if not a trained historian, will have a much quicker grasp of the appropriate questions to ask.¹⁰ The proliferation of oral history guides aimed at amateurs certainly indicates a popular conception of oral history as an accessible history.

However, many of the qualities that make oral histories a revolutionary way of doing history are also those that inspire hesitation in classically trained historians. In particular, the reliance on humans—both as sources and as interviewers—risks human failings. Linda Shopes describes oral histories as an “interpretive event,” subject to the narrator’s memory and decisions within the time constraints of the interview.¹¹ Judith Moyer poses pointed questions: “What of the failings of human memory? What of the human tendency to impose a narrative structure on events that may not be closely connected? What of the self-serving motives of the story teller? What of the power relationships between interviewer and interviewee that affect what and how events are reported? What of the differences between the spoken and written word? What of the inaccuracies that creep into meaning when trying to put a conversation onto paper?”¹²

The early years of the oral history movement are marked by a lack of widely-accepted ethics in the practice of oral history. Oral historians hold the power to edit, reshape, and even bury interviews, and many early practitioners did just that.¹³ Such edits may be born out of a desire to tone down dialect or make the perceived narrative more coherent, thereby performing interpretative history before the primary source has even been collated. Many practitioners now

⁶ Thompson, 3-4.

⁷ Thompson, 5.

⁸ Thompson, 5-6.

⁹ Judith Moyer, “Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History,” *Do History*, 1999, accessed 8 April 2018, http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

¹⁰ Tim Johnson, interview with author, 19 April.

¹¹ Shopes.

¹² Moyer.

¹³ Thompson, 21.

rely on best practices outlined by the Oral History Association, in a document was adopted in its current form in 2009 (though the Association has been operating under similar guidelines since 1968).¹⁴ These guidelines, aimed at lay interviewers as well as academics, caution ethics at each step of the oral history process.¹⁵

Abuses of power in the historical record are not singular to the field of oral history. Moyer reminds us that traditional history is affected by many of the same questions; letters, interviews, and even newspaper articles are written with biases and interpreted with biases.¹⁶ Like home movies and diaries, oral histories are documents that cannot be evaluated unproblematically, and should be cross-referenced with other interviews or evidence. In sum, like all historical sources, oral histories exist most usefully in communion with other types of documentation.

Oral history and the audiovisual archival record

To make their work accessible in the long term, oral historians often choose to deposit their work with institutions, where processing and preservation efforts will make and keep their work accessible in communion with other likeminded materials. However, the exact choice of repository has a huge impact on the context of the materials. What audience does the repository prioritize? What other materials does it collect? Does the repository participate in the creation of oral history, whether partnering with laypeople, professional groups, or training its own staff? How do transcript, digitization, privacy and access policies differ between institutions?

These differences appear even starker when considering some essential similarities among oral histories. Oral histories are all audio or video documents, often accompanied by signed releases and transcripts. These documents face common concerns for audiovisual carriers, including format obsolescence, physical or digital deterioration, and playback machine scarcity, among others. In addition, a single interview may be spread across several tapes and files, exist only as a transcript, or have been digitized to several different specifications. Despite these concerns, the content itself is relatively standardized in comparison to most archival collections. An interview is considered both raw material and the finished product, so there are rarely multiple edits or manifestations of the content; interviews are typically introduced with names, date, and contextual information, making them easy to identify; and additional manuscript materials (save legal releases and transcripts) are rarely accessioned with the oral histories themselves, reducing storage and processing needs. While there are of course exceptions to the above rules, there is an undeniable simplicity to understanding the content. What is critical in this genre, then, is institutional context, or how the institution treats the material and makes it accessible to users.

The New York City institutions interviewed for this paper, profiled in the following four sections, represent a range of environments, from the academic heavyweight to the community-based public library. Each, however, shares the common characteristics of a small staff and a dedication to oral history as a form of inclusive history.

I. Queens Memory

Queens Memory was founded in 2010 by Natalie Milbrodt as both a repository and a training site for volunteer oral historians. Queens Memory serves the borough of Queens, with

¹⁴ "History of the Evaluation Guidelines," Oral History Association, 2009, accessed 19 April 2018, <http://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/History-of-the-Evaluation-Guidelines.pdf>

¹⁵ "Principles and Best Practices," The Oral History Association.

¹⁶ Moyer.

an emphasis on empowering community members to be their own archivists; the organization's mission statement ends with "Queens Memory empowers residents from diverse backgrounds to document the personal histories that together tell a more complete story of life in the borough."¹⁷ Oral histories and related media are collected by and housed at Queens Library, and materials largely come from individual volunteer community members. Training is provided for any member of the public who wants to conduct interviews, and anyone can upload images, text, and audio files to Queens Memory's collections through a free app. Queens Memory is a standalone project at both institutions, and as a result, blends archival and library approaches in handling the materials.¹⁸

Queens Memory was founded by Milbrodt while she was a graduate student in library and information science at Queens College of the City University of New York, where the project was originally based. After graduating, Milbrodt was hired by the Queens Public Library as Coordinator of Metadata Services, where the project has largely migrated. Queens Library pays the salary for a full-time project coordinator and has added project tasks into the full-time duties of several Library staff and interns; Queens College also provides support by funding another part-time project coordinator. Community volunteers perform the majority of the collection's oral history interviews. The nature of volunteering means that oral history collection is accomplished far more slowly, and Milbrodt estimates that they hold under 400 interviews after eight years of operation (a number that includes donations).¹⁹

Digital content, housed on Queens Library's Digital Archives site, is accessible to any member of the public. Some functionalities on the Digital Archives, including commenting and tagging, require either a Queens Library card or an account attached to an email address. The public may also access Queens Memory materials in person by visiting the Archives reading room at Queens Central Library in Jamaica.²⁰ Visitors must obtain a pass to the Archives from the branch's information desk.²¹

II. Brooklyn Historical Society Library & Archives

The Brooklyn Historical Society's oral history program, housed in the BHS Library and Archives, dates back to 1973 and remains one of the only oral history collections in Brooklyn. Under the umbrella of the larger historical society's mission, the oral history initiative aims "to make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today's diverse communities, and for generations to come."²² BHS commissions and conducts oral history interviews largely through partnerships with local community groups, though BHS staff also conducts interviews themselves. Over the past ten years, the oral history collection has been actively expanded, digitized, and highlighted as a particular strength of the institution. Ultimately, however, BHS is a repository for several types of archival collections, and the oral history collections are accessioned and processed according to institution-wide guidelines and priorities.²³

¹⁷ "About," Queens Memory, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://queensmemory.org/about>

¹⁸ Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author, 28 March 2018.

¹⁹ Milbrodt, interview with author.

²⁰ "Frequently Asked Questions," Queens Memory, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://queensmemory.org/FAQ>

²¹ "How to Access," The Archives @ Queens Library, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://www.queenslibrary.org/research/archives/how-to-access>

²² "About," Brooklyn Historical Society Oral History Collections, Brooklyn Historical Society, accessed 24 April 2018, <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/about/#>

²³ Julie May, interview with author, 6 April 2018.

The oral history initiative is split between the solicitation and creation of oral histories (a process managed by Oral Historian Zaheer Ali), and the processing and preservation of those oral histories (under Julie May, Managing Director of Library and Archives, who sometimes has the help of a grant-funded project archivist). Other BHS staff members devote part of their time to the project, including one full-time archivist for the institution at large. The current collecting initiative began in 2006 with former BHS oral historian Sady Sullivan and represents a revival of earlier collecting efforts, details of which are sketchier but also appear to have been initiated by BHS. The BHS Library and Archives also collects oral history materials by donation, and now holds over 1200 interviews in total.²⁴

BHS's oral history collections are accessible to the public by appointment at the BHS location in Brooklyn Heights, in the Othmer Library reading room.²⁵ Three hundred and sixty-four interviews, or about a third of the collection, are available online to the public through BHS's Oral History Portal, a dedicated website under separate control from the Library and Archives's finding aid portal. The interviews are searchable by transcript full text (when available) or with descriptions and tagged indexes. Undigitized transcripts are accessible onsite, while undigitized analog interviews are not accessible to researchers.²⁶

III. Special Collections at New York University

The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, part of New York University's Special Collections, became part of NYU in 1963 and collects records of labor history as well as the radical political movements of the American Left.²⁷ As befits the institution's collecting scope, its oral history collection largely comprises interviews with rank-and-file laborers and party members; it serves as the "official repository" of New York City's Central Labor Council and holds papers from many of its unions, and its most-requested oral histories come from the records of the American Communist Party.²⁸ Many oral histories were conducted by union members themselves and subsequently donated to Tamiment, while other interviews were initiated and conducted by Tamiment staff or NYU graduate students.²⁹

No Tamiment staff members are dedicated full-time to the oral history collection. Director Tim Johnson has been doing the bulk of the work, which of late has been largely collection by donation rather than Tamiment's own initiative.³⁰ However, Tamiment is serving as a model within NYU; Fales Library and Special Collections, another special collection with collecting areas in the Downtown New York art scene and food studies, among others, hopes to partner with outside groups to broaden their oral history collections while emulating Tamiment's policies and procedures.³¹

Tamiment's oral history collections, housed at NYU's Bobst Library in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, are open to the public without appointment, though a visit requires

²⁴ "About," Brooklyn Historical Society Oral History Collections.

²⁵ "Frequently Asked Questions," Brooklyn Historical Society, 2017, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://brooklynhistory.org/library/faq.html#1>

²⁶ Julie May, interview with author.

²⁷ Tamiment Staff, "Guide to the Tamiment Institute Records TAM.007.004," 19 April 2018, accessed 30 April 2018, http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/tam_007_004/tam_007_004.html

²⁸ "Highlighted Collecting Areas," Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, accessed 27 April 2018, <https://library.nyu.edu/about/collections/special-collections-and-archives/tamiment-wagner-archives/>

²⁹ Johnson, interview with author.

³⁰ Johnson, interview with author.

³¹ Marvin Taylor, interview with author, 11 April 2018.

registering a Research Account through NYU Libraries; identifying and requesting materials stored offsite seven business days in advance; presenting valid photo identification to Bobst library security for a day pass; and presenting identification to Tamiment staff upon arrival. There is no charge for creating an access copy of previously-undigitized audiovisual materials, though these copies must be requested four to six weeks prior to the research visit.³² One hundred and nineteen oral histories regarding the Communist Party of America have been made available to the public on a WordPress site,³³ and 1233 more files (representing both clips and full interviews) are available on Tamiment Library’s SoundCloud account.³⁴

IV. Columbia Center for Oral History Archives

The Columbia Center for Oral History Archives (CCOHA), a collection within Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML), was founded in 1948 as one of the earliest repositories for oral history in the world. It is known for early large-scale oral history projects—in particular, its interviews with “Great Men” men famous for success in politics—but curators since the 1980s have slowly broadened collecting scopes to include underrepresented voices and community history.³⁵ CCOHA serves as the institutional repository for the Columbia Center for Oral History Research, which is the collecting wing of the partnership, but also collects oral histories from donors outside the institution. It is regarded as a giant in the history of the field and easily attracts researchers and donors, though within the institution, CCOHA shares budgets and digitization time with the rest of Columbia’s library collections.³⁶

CCOHA has two full-time staff: a curator, Kimberly Springer, and an archivist, David Olson. No other library staff devote significant time to the collection. With a collection of over 10,000 interviews, CCOHA is currently focused on processing a backlog of legacy material and managing the stream of new donations, most of which come from CCOHR or outside the university rather than academic projects.³⁷

CCOHA’s collections are open to the public without appointment, though a visit requires almost identical procedures to NYU’s access policies.³⁸ Researchers may access already-digitized audiovisual files (with two days’ notice) and take photographs of transcripts for free. However, access to any undigitized analog media is subject to a \$75 fee per item, with wait times of up to eight weeks. Six digitized collections, hosted on different websites and representing anywhere from one to 21 interviews each, have been published for public access; some of these interviews have been edited, and the interviews available online do not necessarily represent the complete collections.³⁹

³² “Tamiment Library Research & Tools: Planning Your Visit,” NYU Libraries, 26 March 2018, accessed 29 April 2018, <https://guides.nyu.edu/c.php?g=276867&p=3767630>

³³ “Communist Party Oral Histories,” Tamiment Library, accessed 29 April 2018, <https://wp.nyu.edu/tamimentcpusa/>

³⁴ “Tamiment Library,” SoundCloud station, accessed 28 April 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/user-488941364>

³⁵ “Acquisition Policies: Oral History,” Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library, accessed 24 April 2018, <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/rbml/acquisition.html#oralhist>

³⁶ David Olson, interview with author, 11 April 2018.

³⁷ Kimberly Springer, interview with author, 12 April 2018.

³⁸ “Plan Your Visit,” Columbia Rare Book & Manuscript Library, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/rbml/usingcollections.html>

³⁹ “Digital Projects,” Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh/digital.html>

Workflows and funding structures

While each institution's workflow depend largely on the context of the institution in which it is housed, all are notable for being tied to an active oral history initiative sponsored by the same institution. This distinction is unusual among many archives and special collections, which tend to collect materials generated by others, rather than creating their own materials. The people who staff the repository where oral histories are deposited are rarely the same people in charge of the oral history creation process. Columbia, where the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives and the Columbia Center for Oral History Research exist as separate entities, has the most explicit division of labor and operate as largely separate day-to-day entities. At BHS, recording and archival duties are divided between Oral History Project co-directors, while Tamiment and Queens Memory have more ambiguous boundaries between the work of the repository and the work of oral history itself.

Working closely with an active collecting initiative presents opportunities for collaboration, particularly in the archival processing workflow. Modern oral history practice has interviewers prepare for interviews with extensive research; this knowledge can then be incorporated into pre-accession procedures to save catalogers significant time. Columbia asks oral historians at the Center for Oral History Research to fill out and submit a spreadsheet with fields mapped to local descriptive metadata elements; the spreadsheet is then cleaned up and ingested along with the interview itself.⁴⁰ At BHS, duties associated with the recording process have been expanded from the obvious—interview setup, conducting, and recording—to the more technical tasks of creating a preliminary catalog record and joining together multiple audio files for the same interview.⁴¹ Queens Memory provides an extensive pre-interview survey for subjects and interviewers to fill out, but only requires a timecode outline, a photo of the subject, and a signed consent form for submission.⁴²

None of these requirements eliminates the archivist's work, but they do significantly speed up processing. Other widely-adopted best practices can save time at the same time as reinforcing ethical practice; for example, signed consent forms and verbatim, not edited, transcripts both reduce access and research burdens on the archivist. Some time-saving standards are simply a function of modern technological trends; for example, current oral history practice is to record in digital formats and generate an audio file to widely-held preservation specifications, saving the steps of digitization and standardization. Such workflows are impossible to demand from typical donors, who may have conducted their oral histories decades ago, with fewer guidelines, and on analog carriers that they cannot afford to reformat.

Of course, the same institutions do also process other donations, often in the form of large legacy collection backlogs; Queens Memory, which only began collecting in 2010, is the exception. Workflows for legacy collections and outside donations follow each institution's archival and library procedures, where the most pressing impact on workflow is that of funding. Large legacy collections require focus, time, and money, none of which are in great supply at archival institutions. Tamiment and BHS rely on grant-funded contract archivists to process their legacy collections, as neither have full-time processing archivists devoted to oral history.⁴³ (This fact highlights the difference between administrative work and processing work; despite having full-time oral history administrative staff, the Library and Archives at BHS employs one full-time

⁴⁰ David Olson, interview with author.

⁴¹ Julie May, interview with author.

⁴² Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author.

⁴³ Tim Johnson, interview with author.

processing archivist for all collections at the institution, among which oral histories cannot regularly be prioritized.)⁴⁴ At Queens Memory, where most contributors are volunteers, grant-funded projects allow Queens Memory to hire contract staff for systematic collecting pushes. One of the latest projects, titled “Memories of Migration,” collected oral histories from Mandarin and Cantonese speakers; Milbrodt noted that hiring a facilitator with language skills is crucial to solicit stories from elderly community members who are not comfortable in English, whose stories are often neglected for this reason.

Whether a new or legacy collection, most repositories view transcription as a major step to making oral histories accessible. Julie May of BHS values transcripts for opening up full-text search to users of BHS’s online oral history portal. David Olson of Columbia also notes that transcripts save researchers time, allowing them to skim interviews for relevant information as well as simplifying citations. Transcripts also allow institutions to serve up the collection while respecting preservation concerns; Columbia avoids playback of undigitized materials by serving transcripts to researchers by default.⁴⁵ Generally, however, it is hard to rely on transcripts as an access vector, given the time demands of transcription and the fact that few of these collections have even one full-time processing archivist. Existing transcripts were generally outsourced to vendors (BHS) or to the interviewers themselves as part of their institutional workflow (Columbia, whose legacy transcripts remain undigitized).^{46,47} Tamiment’s collections, which come largely from union and party members rather than career oral historians, typically arrive without transcripts and are digitized before transcription in order to make them accessible without that extra step.⁴⁸

However, transcription is not necessarily a golden bullet to accessibility. For example, Queens Memory’s workflow consciously avoids transcription, and instead creates timecode outlines, in which keyword-searchable summary annotations are tied to timecodes in a digital oral history. Milbrodt’s reasons for a timecode outline partly stem from transcription’s demands on staff time, but also from concerns tied to the context of the oral histories. Whether or not the researcher is a linguist or sociologist, the accents, pauses, and personality of the subject provide a great deal of an oral history’s nuance and depth. Such details, not to mention the “oral” quality of an oral history, are lost when a written document is used as the primary record of the interview.⁴⁹ Even institutions that traditionally prioritize transcriptions may admit their fallibility in the case of legacy collections. Oral histories from Columbia’s first couple of decades (1948 through the early 1970s) usually survive only as transcripts. In some cases, tapes were reused as a cost-saving measure; in others, they were destroyed after transcription, likely just because historians were used to the primacy of textual documents and undervalued audio as a historical record. A similar slowness to adjust to oral histories as primary sources in their own right arises in transcripts from Columbia’s earliest years, through the early 1950s, which were often heavily edited to form a cohesive narrative. In such cases, a transcript may be the only access point, but should not be taken at face value.⁵⁰ Columbia emphasizes this point in face-to-face reference interviews, while BHS (whose collections are primarily accessed online) has placed a note on their

⁴⁴ Julie May, interview with author.

⁴⁵ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Columbia Center for Oral History Archives, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh/FAQ.html>

⁴⁶ Julie May, interview with author.

⁴⁷ David Olson, interview with author.

⁴⁸ Tim Johnson, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author.

⁵⁰ David Olson, interview with author.

“About” page specifying that transcripts created prior to 2008 or commissioned by a party other than BHS “are not considered verbatim.”⁵¹

Transcription also plays a role in questions of digitization. With transcripts for most oral histories past the first 25 years of the Columbia Center for Oral History, its archives can serve materials without digital copies and can complete backend work (processing, arranging, description) based on the transcript contents. CCOHA also benefits from the library’s preservation department’s reformatting push, an initiative that digitized about half of the 10,000-item oral history collection for preservation reasons.⁵² Researchers who want access to the audio of a yet-undigitized interview must pay a 75-dollar digitization fee, which helps cover the costs of digitization.⁵³ Tamiment, which does not typically receive transcripts, cannot describe content without a digitized oral history because of the preservation concerns associated with playback of original audiovisual materials. Complicating this limitation is the fact that Tamiment has little in-house digitization ability and can only digitize through researcher request or outside grant funding.⁵⁴ However, while Tamiment has a much smaller percentage of its collection digitized, it has put many of its digitized interviews online, while Columbia is still testing out publication workflows for its materials and requires research visits for access to the vast majority of its collections.⁵⁵

Privacy, access, and digital content

Oral histories, like any historical record, are only useful if they can be accessed by those who want to use them. Privacy issues present a particular hurdle to making oral histories accessible; in a field that centers ethical deliberateness, making life stories public knowledge without consent represents obvious misconduct. Many legacy collections have missing or confusing release forms. David Olson of Columbia makes the point that even oral histories without release forms at least establish the interviewer and interviewee’s names, giving catalogers a place to start looking for the subject or next-of-kin. However, the subject may remain elusive. Tim Johnson of Tamiment noted the difficulty of tracking down the working-class subjects represented in their collection, as typical clues such as death notices were often too expensive for laborers. And even if an oral history is accompanied by a release form, archivists may question the terms of the release. Both May (BHS) and Johnson (Tamiment) made the point that distribution platforms such as the Internet did not exist at the time of many releases, and that interviewees could hardly anticipate the implication of indiscriminate, round-the-clock public access to their words.

In the interest of providing access while respecting issues of privacy, each institution draws a distinction between on-site and online access, usually regulating the latter more strictly. Columbia allows researchers to listen to oral histories on-site even without signed release forms if they can trace the intent of the interviewer and subject through correspondence, but would not put those same materials online.⁵⁶ Similarly, BHS does not upload oral histories without releases, or any involving minors.⁵⁷ Tamiment is willing to put oral histories online after a good-faith

⁵¹ “About: Guidelines for Use,” Brooklyn Historical Society, 2018, accessed 26 April 2018, <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/about/#>

⁵² David Olson, interview with author.

⁵³ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Columbia Center for Oral History Archives.

⁵⁴ Tim Johnson, interview with author.

⁵⁵ David Olson, interview with author.

⁵⁶ David Olson, interview with author.

⁵⁷ Julie May, interview with author.

effort to contact the subject or their descendants; this policy has been reinforced by positive responses from family members who discovered their relatives' voices and stories.⁵⁸ Queens Memory, on the other hand, refuses to take oral histories with restrictions, citing the difficulty of enforcing embargoes with a small, largely-volunteer staff.⁵⁹ To facilitate this policy, Queens Memory provides (and requires) consent forms in English, Spanish, Bengali, and Chinese (simplified and traditional).⁶⁰

Another thorny issue facing oral history initiatives is that of intellectual control and representation—that is, the logical organization of oral history interviews, projects, and collections. The structure of catalog records and finding aids has far-ranging (though seemingly mundane) implications for public access points to oral histories. The institutions profiled in this paper generally approach cataloging and access through one or both of the following strategies: item-level cataloging, in which each interview is described and accessed as a discrete object, and collection-based finding aids, in which each interview is put into the context of the project or collection in which it was created. BHS and NYU produce finding aids in Encoded Archival Description (EAD), as is policy for archival collections at each institution,⁶¹⁶² while Columbia and Queens Memory produce Machine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) records for each oral history, according to the policies already in place at the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Queens Library.⁶³⁶⁴ These choices largely stem from issues of practicality and conformance systems rather than the particular desires of the staff. Oral histories are not completely served by either strategy; finding aids are not optimized for audiovisual items, nor are library catalogs well-equipped to describe primary sources.

Further complicating the process of intellectual access is the fact that most of these institutions make their material accessible on multiple sites, each of which requires a different presentation. This practice is necessitated by the fact that finding aid portals and catalogs usually cannot host digitized content, so institutions that want to make their digital resources accessible to the public must host it on a different website and somehow attempt to link between the two resources. BHS, which organizes oral history records in the form of a finding aid in its “finding aid portal,” presents the digitized content corresponding to these records on its “oral history portal,” where digitized interviews are each accessed on an individualized item-level page. In the interest of providing access to the interview record in the institution's preferred access point, as well as hosting the digitized content for the public, BHS thus catalogs its oral histories in at least two systems. Furthermore, recognizing the difficulty of linking between these different search systems, BHS has set up a “landing page” to unify its online resources.⁶⁵ This tangle of resources creates multiple access points at both the item and collection level, as can be seen in Appendix I.

BHS is not the only institution with confusing points of access. At Columbia, interviews exist as individual catalog records in three different portals: an “Oral History Portal,” an “Archival Collections Portal,” and a university-wide catalog called CLIO in which the records appear to actually reside. Digitized interviews are hosted on entirely different project-based

⁵⁸ Tim Johnson, interview with author.

⁵⁹ Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author

⁶⁰ “Forms for Participants,” Queens Memory, 2016, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://queensmemory.org/blogs/technical>

⁶¹ Julie May, interview with author.

⁶² Tim Johnson, interview with author.

⁶³ David Olson, interview with author.

⁶⁴ Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author

⁶⁵ Julie May, interview with author.

websites, with a different website for each project and/or collection. None of the Columbia catalog records link to the digitized content, nor do project websites link to any of the Columbia catalog records. It is also worth noting that catalog records for individual interviews do not link between related oral histories, even when these interviews are grouped together on a project website; thus, someone searching for Mamie Phipps Clark might encounter her oral history in the context of other “Notable New Yorkers” on a project website, but as a lone wolf within the Columbia catalogs. These different access points may also be seen in Appendix I.

Tamiment struggles with similar issues. Its most extensive materials are available on a SoundCloud page, with no links between that page and the Tamiment website; oral histories uploaded to SoundCloud are presented without collection numbers or even descriptions giving context as to the interview’s content. Queens Memory oral history records currently exist on the Queens College Digital Archives site despite being destined for ultimate deposit with Queens Library, a complicated setup somewhat sidestepped by the central Queens Memory website that remains unconnected with either.

These intersecting yet separate vectors of access are one of the most frustrating features of each collection from a user standpoint, a fact that each institution clearly appreciates. While it may be most cohesive for BHS as an institution to encode its oral histories as finding aids, where they can be searched among the rest of the archival collections, this portal is unnavigable or confusing for many users. Part of the impetus for the oral history portal was BHS’s realization that the only users who seemed able to navigate this portal were scholarly researchers, notably because Google did not originally trawl the particular finding aid platform in use. Given the community-documentation focus of both the oral history collection and the Brooklyn Historical Society at large, such a limited reach was deemed at odds with the initiative, hence the development of a landing page and eventually a new, user-friendly interface.⁶⁶

One might ask, given all the effort poured into ever-newer points of access, how much digitized content actually impacts a user base. Julie May of BHS makes the point that they actually don’t know how the makeup of their user base has changed in response to this content, as the entire point is that the material is now available online without any gatekeeping, making decades of work accessible to the public without login or digitization fees. However, in some cases oral history collections are demonstrably popular; one of the reasons that Fales Library, in NYU’s Special Collections, is considering mounting an oral history initiative is because their existing oral history collections comprise some of their most-used at Fales, as well as one of the most-visited web pages in the NYU Libraries system.⁶⁷ Generally speaking, however, restrictions such as onsite-only access, required photo identification, and the ability to read a finding aid, identify actual oral histories, and figure out whether researchers are actually allowed to use them, all tend to narrow the pool of potential users to traditional-history academics—an unfortunate end state of a form of record meant to build history from the ground up. In this context, the push to democratize history access along with history making makes perfect sense.

Some oral history repositories go beyond giving access to digital content towards providing access to digital *tools*. Queens Memory demonstrates a commitment to institutional transparency that is particularly worthy of note; Natalie Milbrodt has made many of their forms, policies, and cataloging guidelines freely available to the public, including everything from a

⁶⁶ Julie May, interview with author.

⁶⁷ Marvin Taylor, interview with author.

MARC to VRA metadata crosswalk to participant consent forms in four languages.⁶⁸ Queens Memory has a mobile app that provides another path to upload recordings and supporting documentation to Queens Memory, the code for which is available freely on GitHub.⁶⁹ The Brooklyn Historical Society has made the WordPress plugins that make up its Oral History Portal available to the public through their own institutional GitHub page.⁷⁰ Such moves lower the barriers for community archivists to build their own repositories without reinventing the wheel, a tenet fully compatible with the values of oral history.

Institutional impact on oral history

What do these comparisons add up to, when taken in sum? Does institutional context influence the practice and collection of oral histories, especially given the seemingly infinite shades of grey in each decision of preservation and access? The institutions profiled fall on a rough spectrum, between public-oriented (Queens Memory) and academic-oriented (Columbia). This spectrum exists partly by chance. Milbrodt's project was originally housed in the Queens College Archives, where participation was largely CUNY-affiliated faculty and their research assistants. Milbrodt believes that if Queens Memory had stayed at the Archives, the content would be far more scholarly and research-oriented. The library setting has reshaped Queens Memory's focus to promoting community involvement; the project offers far more services than it gets back in the form of content, and views the time spent talking to patrons about interviewing and personal digital archiving as investments in the community. Such an approach benefits from the fact that public libraries are pillars of community trust. Relationships with participants can develop over time as they return again and again to the library; indeed, some participants take years to warm up to the project. The library's very existence as an established neighborhood gathering site lends credence and stability to the project.⁷¹

Despite this institutional strength, oral history projects may even differ from public library to public library. Milbrodt notes that Queens Memory is influenced by its home department, metadata services, at the Queens Public Library, making the project particularly digital- and cataloging-oriented. Oral history projects run out of other New York City public libraries are run out of older adult services (at the Brooklyn Public Library) and neighborhood-based public programming (at the New York Public Library), each of which emphasize different populations. In each of these institutions, however, the layperson has a relatively obvious, welcoming route to get their oral histories into an institution.

A local historical society such as the Brooklyn Historical Society bridges a gap between public and academic libraries, combining an obvious community stake with a historical role as a research institution. BHS also partners with community groups to create oral histories, though in a slightly more structured manner than Queens Memory's volunteer operation and, as a result, less receptive to one-off projects or donations. BHS also offers far less institutional openness than the public library, with a reading room only open four hours a day, four days a week.⁷² However,

⁶⁸ "Technical Resources," Queens Memory, 2016, accessed 29 April 2018, <http://queensmemory.org/blogs/technical>

⁶⁹ Queens Borough Public Library, "queens_memory," GitHub repository, 2018, accessed 30 April 2018, https://github.com/QueensLibrary/queens_memory

⁷⁰ Brooklyn Historical Society, "brooklynhistory," GitHub user profile, 2018, accessed 30 April 2018, <https://github.com/brooklynhistory>

⁷¹ Natalie Milbrodt, interview with author.

⁷² "Visit the Othmer Library," Brooklyn Historical Society, 2017, accessed 28 April 2018, <http://brooklynhistory.org/library/visit.html>

these limited hours are mitigated by perhaps the most easily-navigable and comprehensive online portal of all the institutions surveyed. It is very easy for the public to access BHS's digitized collections, a feature perhaps reinforced by BHS's institutional commitment directly to the public (specifically, to the people of Brooklyn).

Academic libraries present the greatest barriers to access for the public. The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives also straddle a line between the public and the academy, with a collecting policy dedicated to the American worker and political radical. However, Tamiment is housed within a university special collections with restrictive access policies, and without its digitized content—which is difficult to find and presented without context—would be largely closed to the same public whose history it documents. Columbia has similarly restrictive access policies and a far smaller percentage of digitized material. However, both collections are regarded as prestigious by the academic community, and attract donations, researchers, and inquiries from across the country. This clout comes partly from the strength of their collections, but also certainly from the names of the universities to which they are attached. Such authority can be wielded for the benefit of the field of oral history at large, in symbiosis with the community-based archives doing the work of community engagement.

It must finally be noted that the similarities and differences detailed in this paper are miniscule in the broader picture of libraries and archives. In interview after interview, staff members responded to questions with thoughtfulness, having considered their ethical responsibilities in the context of practical restrictions on time and money. At Queens Memory, Natalie Milbrodt built an archive from the ground up to address the need for grassroots and community archiving; archivists at repositories such as Columbia are the latest in a long line of staff dealing with 70 years of institutional memory and differing priorities. Despite differences in practical details, each repository takes its role seriously in preserving and making accessible these unique documents. Such engaged and reflective stewardship will serve oral histories well as each institution works towards its ultimate goals.

Appendix I. Digital records and content on oral history websites.

N., A., 1992 May 4

Biographical / Historical

A woman living with HIV/AIDS, A.N. was forty-three years old at the time of the interview in 1992. Originally from Grenada, she moved with her family to Brooklyn when she was ten months old. After a break up with her partner of seventeen years, she moved to California where, within a few years, she found out she was living with what she called "full blown AIDS." The interview took place in the house she grew up in, where she lives with her family who help care for her.

Scope and Contents

In the interview, A.N. discusses the life of a single Black woman living with HIV/AIDS in Brooklyn. The narrator speaks clearly throughout about her health challenges, weaving together her time in California and her time in Brooklyn. She speaks specifically about the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights in relation to people's ideas of who has HIV, and who doesn't. She also speaks at some length about sexuality, race, and HIV. Towards the end of the recording, an unidentified second interviewer comes in. Interview conducted by Robert Rosenberg.

Conditions Governing Access and Use

Access to the interview is available onsite at the Brooklyn Historical Society's Othmer Library and online on the Oral History Portal. Use of the oral histories other than for private study, scholarship, or research requires the permission of BHS. For assistance, contact library@brooklynhistory.org.

Subject Topics

- AIDS (Disease) -- New York (State) -- New York
- AZT (Drug)
- Family life -- New York (State) -- Kings County
- HIV infections -- New York (State) -- New York
- HIV-positive persons -- New York (State) -- Kings County
- Sexual health -- New York (State) -- Kings County
- Social group work -- New York (State)
- Women's health services -- New York (State) -- Kings County
- Stigma (Social psychology) -- New York (State) --

- Scrapbooks
- Special Collections
- Vertical Subject Files
- Voter Registries
- Research Subject Guides
- African-American History
- BHS Building
- Brooklyn Agriculture
- Brooklyn Dodgers
- Brooklyn Jewish History
- Brooklyn Navy Yard
- Civil Rights
- Civil War
- Coney Island and Gravesend
- Family History
- House & Building

Searching:

As BHS works toward a single online access catalog for oral histories, there are a few entry points for searching.

- **NYU finding aid portal**
Search collection-level and item-level finding aids using keywords.
- **BHS Oral History Portal**
Our recently launched portal allows for keyword searching across oral history collections and within each interview's transcript, when available. Launched in early 2017, the portal contains a portion of BHS's oral histories including:
 - **AIDS/Brooklyn Oral History Project collection, 1992-1993 (1993.001)**
 - **Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation oral histories, 2007-2008 (2008.030)**
 - **Crown Heights History Project collection, 1993-1994 (1994.006)**
 - **Hispanic Communities Documentation Project records, 1989 (1989.004)**
 - **Listen to This: Crown Heights Oral History collection, 2010 (2010.020)**
 - **New Neighbors: Sunset Park's Chinese Community records, 1993-1994 (1989.004)**
 - **Puerto Rican Oral History Project records, 1973-1975 (1976.001)**
 - **West Indian Carnival**

AIDS/Brooklyn Oral History Project collection 1992-1993 (1993.001)



← Back to collection

ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

This collection includes oral histories collected for the *AIDS/Brooklyn* exhibition, undertaken by the Brooklyn Historical Society in the early 1990s. The project attempted to document the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Brooklyn communities.

This collection was processed and described as part of the project, 'Voices of Generations: Investigating Brooklyn's Cultural Identity,' funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation.

[AIDS/Brooklyn Oral History Project collection](#)

ORAL HISTORIES

- [Broman, Melinda \(1992/06/20\)](#)
- [Coleman, Philip \(1992/06/13\)](#)
- [John, Marilyn \(1992/06/23\)](#)
- [Morciglio, Adolph \(1992/06/01\)](#)
- [Morrissey, Karen and Robert Ripp \(1992/07/29\)](#)
- [Mulcahy, Donna \(1992/06/27\)](#)
- [N., A. \(1992/05/04\)](#)

A. N.

Oral history interview conducted by Robert Rosenberg
May 04, 1992
Call number: 1993.001.11



TRANSCRIPT

INDEX

0:02 - Life after an AIDS diagnosis and a bad breakup, moving back to Brooklyn

Previous page: Oral history of a woman, “A.N.,” interviewed for the AIDS/Brooklyn Oral History Project, in four contexts on BHS-run websites. Clockwise from top left:

1. A.N.’s entry in Series 1 of the collection finding aid, with no direct link to digitized content (in BHS’s finding aid portal <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/findingaid/111/>);
2. A link to the collection splash page (#4, bottom left) on a WordPress “landing page” meant to unify the BHS collections (<http://brooklynhistory.org/library/wp/library-collections/oralhistory/>);
3. A.N. presented as an individual interview in BHS’s oral history portal, linked from the digitized AIDS/Brooklyn collection splash page, which also links back to the finding aid (#1) (<http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/>).⁷³

Next page: Oral history of Mamie Phipps Clark, included in Columbia’s “Notable New Yorkers” collection. Clockwise from top left:

1. Catalog entry for Mamie Phipps Clark in the Oral History Portal and Archival Collections Portal (same entry, accessed from search pages with different titles and URLs: <http://library.columbia.edu/find/oral-history-portal.html>; <http://library.columbia.edu/find/archives-portal.html>);
2. Catalog entry for Mamie Phipps Clark in CLIO (<https://clio.columbia.edu/>);
2. a link to the collection splash page (#4, bottom left) on a WordPress “landing page” meant to unify the BHS collections (<http://brooklynhistory.org/library/wp/library-collections/oralhistory/>);
3. as an individual interview on Columbia’s “Notable New Yorkers” site, linked from the “Notable New Yorkers” home page (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nyy/>).⁷⁴

⁷³ Screenshots, clockwise from top left, taken 29 April 2018 at:

1. http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/bhs/arms_1993_001_aids-brooklyn/arms_1993_001_aids-brooklyn.html;
2. <http://brooklynhistory.org/library/wp/library-collections/oralhistory/>;
3. http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/collections/aidsbrooklyn-oral-history-project-collection_1993-001/; 4. <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/oralhistory/interviews/n-a-19920504/>

⁷⁴ Screenshots, clockwise from top left, taken 29 April 2018 at:

1. https://oralhistoryportal.library.columbia.edu/document.php?id=ldpd_4074144;
2. <https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/4074144>;
3. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nyy/clarkm/index.html>;
4. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nyy/>

CU Home > Libraries Home

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COLUMBIA CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY

Oral History Interviews Portal

Libraries & Collections Catalogs E-Resources Request It Ask Us Using the Libraries

Columbia Center for Oral History Portal >

Reminiscences of Mamie Phipps Clark : oral history, 1976.

Creator: Clark, Mamie Phipps.
Project: Biographical interview
Phys. Desc. : Transcript: 100 leaves. Tape: 1 reel.
Location: Columbia Center for Oral History
[Full CLIO record >>](#)

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Child psychologist; interviewee married Kenneth B. Clark.

SCOPE AND CONTENTS

Arkansas childhood; BS, MS, Howard University; PhD., Columbia University, 1946; Riverdale Children's Association; founding of Northside Center, 1946; child psychology with underprivileged urban children; relationship of community and Northside Center; impressions of Adam Clayton Powell.

SUBJECTS

- African American children.
- African Americans--Education.
- African Americans--Psychology.
- Clark, Kenneth Bancroft, 1914-2005.
- Clark, Mamie Phipps.
- Edwin, Ed., interviewer.
- Interviews.
- New York (N.Y.)--Politics and government--1951-

Using this collection

Columbia Center for Oral History

Address:
 Columbia University
 535 West 114th Street
 801 Butler Library, Box 20
 MC1129
 New York, NY 10027
Telephone:
 (212) 854-7083

Email:
oralhist@libraries.cul.columbia.edu

Website:
[Columbia Center for Oral History](http://ColumbiaCenterforOralHistory)

Source Catalog

Clark, Mamie Phipps

All Fields

Advanced Search

Reminiscences of Mamie Phipps Clark : oral history, 1976

Author Clark, Mamie Phipps.
Title Reminiscences of Mamie Phipps Clark : oral history, 1976.
Description Transcript: 100 leaves. Tape: 1 reel.

Summary Arkansas childhood; BS, MS, Howard University, PhD., Columbia University, 1946; Riverdale Children's Association; founding of Northside Center, 1946; child psychology with underprivileged urban children; relationship of community and Northside Center; impressions of Adam Clayton Powell.

Biographical / Historical Note Child psychologist; interviewee married Kenneth B. Clark.

Restrictions Access: Open.
Notes Interviewed by Ed Edwin.

Subjects Clark, Mamie Phipps. Clark, Kenneth Bancroft, 1914-2005. Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr., 1908-1972. Northside Center for Child Development. Psychologists > Interviews. Women psychologists > Interviews. African American children. African Americans > Psychology. African Americans > Education. New York (N.Y.) > Politics and government > 1951-

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Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office

NOTABLE NEW YORKERS

NOTABLE NEW YORKERS

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[Kenneth Clark](#)
[Mamie Clark](#)
[Moe Foner](#)
[Andrew Heiskell](#)
[Edward J. Koch](#)
[Mary Lasker](#)
[John B. Oakes](#)
[Frances Perkins](#)
[Frank Stanton](#)

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PLEASE NOTE: The audio files on this site are playable with either RealPlayer or the VLC Media Player.

The Notable New Yorkers Web site offers audio recordings and transcripts of interviews with ten influential New Yorkers, drawn from the collections of the Oral History Research Office of the Columbia University Libraries. These interviews, conducted by the Office between 1955 and 2001, open an imaginative portal into twentieth-century New York City and the ways in which it has deeply affected the culture and history of the United States and the world beyond. With three background essays and a brief methodological introduction for each oral history, this site also provides a revealing look at the art of the biographical interview—a methodology developed by the Office over its four and a half decades of existence—in which individuals who have shaped history reflect upon their lives and accomplishments.

We invite you to explore the site and [send us your comments](#).

Mary Marshall Clark, Director, Oral History Research Office

Background Essays

by Dr. Ronald J. Crele, Director Emeritus, Oral History Research Office



Columbia's Oral History Research Office



Notable New Yorkers



New York and the Nation with excerpts from Dr. Crele's video interview

Columbia University Libraries Oral History Research Office

NOTABLE NEW YORKERS

SELECT A NOTABLE NEW YORKER:

Select one go

Mamie CLARK



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[Index of Names](#)

Psychologist and activist Mamie Phipps Clark conducted groundbreaking studies on race and child development that helped end segregation in the United States. She also founded the Northside Center for Child Development in Harlem, which has eased that community through social, educational, and psychological changes for half a century.

[Introduction](#)

Read background information on the interviewer and the interview, and listen to an audio excerpt.

[Profile](#)

Read a biography of Mamie Clark.

[Photo Gallery](#)

View photographs of Mamie Clark.

[Audio and Transcript](#)

Read the transcript and listen to the audio of the interview.

[Table of Contents](#)

Browse the subjects covered in each session using links to transcript pages.

[Index of Names](#)

View an index of proper names mentioned in the interview.

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