

Evan Leavitt
Bibliographic Essay
LS555 Intro to Archival Studies
Dr. Riter
Fall 2020

For Want of a Better Name: Oral History

Until the appearance of written text, humanity relied on the transference of knowledge through the spoken word. The voice held authority and agency. This still holds true; however, the usage of the text supplanted its dominance in this role. The archive came into existence to collect these texts, preserving the transcribed knowledge deemed important. However, text is incapable of “speaking” for the full spectrum of a society. It is ironic that archives have historically been described as being filled with voices, when the orality of voice, what is arguably the defining essence of voice, has been rendered two-dimensional. Oral history, now long-touted as the answer to addressing archival gaps found within collections and repositories shaped through colonialism and structural oppression, emerged as a means to provide a voice to archival silences, filling in the voids found in the historical record, thus allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the past. However, the weight of import has shifted on what defines a more comprehensive understanding of the past within archives since the first appearance of the practice in the *American Archivist* in 1955, with Bombard’s discussion of the new technique, “which for the want of a better name is called oral history.”¹ This essay will discuss selected literature that investigates the archival practice of oral history, illustrating the implications of how the process of transcription has, quite literally, silenced the very voices it is supposed to be documenting, and to illuminate the trend of placing the orality of these histories back in the forefront of discourse through the new-found accessibility made possible in the digital environment of the 21st century.

¹ Bombard, Owen W. 1955 “A New Measure of Things Past.” *American Archivist* 18 (2): 123-32.

Oral history, as a practice, appeared as early as the 1930s with the collecting of enslaved peoples' narratives by the Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the entities emerging out of Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives to employ citizens during the Great Depression. However, the practice was not widely utilized due to inherent roadblocks presented by technological knowledge bases and lack of theoretical frameworks. The realization of the changing nature of societal document making in the mid-twentieth century, as Bombard illustrates as the "rapid transportation and instantaneous communication, telephonic messages or personal conferences" that have "shaped the major decisions of our time without leaving a shred of written evidence for the future;" led to the wider investigation of the use of oral history as a means to "increase the quantity and quality of historical sources, to decrease the shadows of historical twilight now illuminated only by partial documentation."² But Bombard goes on to warn that initiating the usage of oral history presents "a clear and present danger that many institutions, intrigued by its possibilities, will hastily adopt the new technique without the full understanding of all its implications."³ That through its application, oral history may overwhelm the student of history with an abundance of material "recorded solely for recording's sake."⁴ This warning was meant to temper usage of the medium and instill restraint and contemplation in determining what is "destined for permanent retention" and "prevent dissipation of effort in the collection of unrelated fragments of knowledge."⁵ Although Bombard emphasizes that precaution should be taken to ensure that oral histories fill in known blank spots within the documentary evidence, it is clear that Bombard sees the purpose of oral history, within the context of his usage of the practice in documenting the Ford Motor Company, as a means to

² Bombard, Owen W. "A New Measure of Things Past," 124.

³ Ibid., 124.

⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵ Ibid., 125.

supplement the documentation of prominent individuals. Not until the rise of the social history movement of the late 1960s and 1970s did the importance of oral histories in documenting “history from the bottom up” become evident, divergently leading the field from the values previously placed on oral histories as a means to supplement the documents of the privileged and powerful.⁶ This change coincided with the Society of American Archivists (SAA) creation of an oral history committee in 1969, thus legitimizing, to some degree, the practice for the archival profession and contributing to its expansive growth in usage during the following decades.

The combined effect of the social history movement and the growing professional interest in the practice brought about the need to revise and amend professional guidelines by the SAA, as well as producing archival and library scholarly discourse revolving around two distinct themes; the debated value of oral histories and their ability to “fill in” scholarly gaps, and the appropriateness of creation of oral histories by archivists, which even Bombard implied was counter to traditional archival practice.⁷ The newly formed Committee on Oral History of the SAA initiated a survey of the professional field to examine assumptions and practices in the collection, processing, and administration of oral history materials, in order to stimulate “a more thoughtful and orderly discussion of the field of oral history.”⁸ The survey found that 73 percent of respondents held the opinion that oral history should be viewed as a regular archival activity and that individuals engaged in collecting oral histories should consider themselves professional archivists. However, the survey also identified a trend that has continued to the present; 72 percent of the survey respondents “indicated that their interviews were not being used as much as

⁶Swain, Ellen D. "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," *American Archivist* 66:1 (Spring - Summer 2003): 139-158.

⁷ Bombard, Owen W. “A New Measure of Things Past,” 125.

⁸ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. 1973. “Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask.” *American Archivist* 36 (3):361-365.

possible by researchers.”⁹ The survey hoped to ascertain to what extent was under-utilization of interviews caused by the inability of researchers to locate oral history collections pertinent to their research, or caused by remaining professional doubts about the validity of oral history interviews.¹⁰ The latter concern with oral histories is illustrated in Bombard’s assertion that “despite the skill of the interviewer, however, the ultimate gauge of quality is the memory and capacity of the person interviewed.”¹¹ The survey surmised the difficulties in the retrieval and research use of oral history interviews as: locating institutional holdings containing oral histories with specific subject topics, locating specific interviews within an institution’s catalog, and locating specific information within a given interview.¹² These issues still resonate, and there exists an impression of oral histories as sitting “in shoeboxes in closets and on dusty archive shelves where they were rarely, if ever, listened to by researchers and integrated, beyond customary ways into their work.”¹³

Bombard identifies, even in the early stages of oral history’s emergence within the archival field, potential issues that the medium created around accessibility, stating the “recordings would be awkward research tools if preserved only on spools of tape,” and that these deficiencies in accessibility could be overcome and be provided historical validating safeguards through transcription, reviewing, editing, and lastly, indexing. This process would provide the framework to transform “memory into a permanent record for further research.”¹⁴ However, with Bombard’s description of the validation process, the foundation is laid for the profession’s

⁹ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. “Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask,” 363.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹¹ Bombard, Owen W. “A New Measure of Things Past,” 129.

¹² Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. “Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask,” 363.

¹³ Zembrzycki, Stacey. “Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews.” *Oral History* 41, no. 1 (2013): 98-107.

¹⁴ Bombard, Owen W. “A New Measure of Things Past,” 129-130.

approach to oral histories, which becomes ingrained in practice, directly contributing to the difficulties of accessibility, usability, and in the silencing of the voice. Bombard's stressing of the importance of transcription, which also coincides with the author's only mention of a female player in the process of collecting oral histories of "men of industry," relies on the transcriber's skill in "integrating the interviewing questions and answers into a smooth-flowing narrative."¹⁵ Furthermore, "she provides the sentence and paragraph structure, eliminates the false starts and stops, and in the final analysis determines the conversational flavor and style of the preliminary manuscript."¹⁶ Before the final manuscript is completed, the interviewee is allowed to edit the text. Here Bombard makes the astute observation that "despite every precaution, the subject is seldom prepared to see his own words in print. Reaction runs the complete range of human emotion."¹⁷ Dunaway posits that this is due to transcription's required "sharp and often unconscious application of written grammar to oral grammar;" in other words, we don't write like we talk.¹⁸ A verbatim transcription may come across as illiterate. This process emerges as one of the crux issues with transcription of oral histories, as Foster states, "a written transcript is simply someone else's interpretation of that recording."¹⁹ Dunaway ponders the impact of transcription by asking, "what do we find in an oral transcription" and have oral historians speculated on "what users encounter as they sit down at their desks to make sense of the transcripts?"²⁰

¹⁵ Bombard, Owen W. "A New Measure of Things Past," 130.

¹⁶ Ibid., 130.

¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

¹⁸ Dunaway, David King. 1984. "Transcription: Shadow or Reality?" *Oral History Review* 12. 113-117.

¹⁹ Foster, Helen. 2018. "Finding Poetry in the Sound Archives: Creatively Repurposing Oral Histories for Re-Presentation and Engagement." *Oral History* 46 (1): 111-118.

²⁰ Dunaway, David King. "Transcription: Shadow or Reality?" 113.

Dunaway's pointed scrutiny of the process of transcription inquires whether a transcript documents an interview or a series of facts. Let us look at the definition of oral history, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* provides two definitions of the phrase *oral history*: "a recording containing information about the past obtained from in-depth interviews concerning personal experiences, recollections, and reflections" and "a written work based on oral history."²¹ Defined in this manner, the voice is removed from existence; transplanted by the means in which it was captured, the recording device, or the means in which it is presented, through textual transcription. As Karpf observes, the voice is "thus reduced to a retrieval mechanism," therefore preventing oral historians from fully exploiting the "richness of their medium."²² The phrase 'lost in translation' comes to mind in regard to transcription; the tape to text methodology fails to translate meanings found within the delivery of the words. This is further evidenced in Dunaway's statement that the "oral interview is a multilayered communicative event, which a transcript only palely reflects. The narrator may have said what we type, but how do we capture the meaning when it is locked out of the transcript in gestures or in emphases through shift in pitch."²³ The act of transcription has the tendency to prevent contemplation beyond the literal meaning of the words transcribed; considering that voice is essential to oral history, it is imperative we think not only about what the voice says, but how it says it.²⁴ Therefore, Dunaway submits that the transcription is inherently inaccurate, that the process "decontextualizes oral information to the point of inutility; for the transcript is hybrid, neither oral nor written, a shallow reflection of a living, dynamic event."²⁵ Within this train of thought lies the genesis of

²¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oral%20history> Accessed November 24, 2020.

²² Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience." *Oral History*, 42(2):50-55.

²³ Dunaway, David King. "Transcription: Shadow or Reality?" 116.

²⁴ Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience," 52. Karpf referencing Charles Joyner in "Oral history as communicative event," in Dunaway and Buam, 1984, p 391 and Shelley Trower in *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2001, p 8.

²⁵ Dunaway, David King. "Transcription: Shadow or Reality?" 117.

contention. How do you resolve the problems presented by the dichotomy of values found in transcription? Karpf discusses oral historians struggle on,

whether they should desist from tidying up speech, including hesitations and repetitions and avoid correcting grammar, or whether the oral subject should be invited to review a draft transcript, allowing them to jointly author, as it were, the transcript. Some believe that such a process of ‘correction’ weakens the authenticity of oral evidence; others argue that participants should be allowed to reflect on and amend their first version of their account in this way.²⁶

Karpf goes on to state that any attempt to “reassert the value of orality” threatens a “false polarization” which pits the oral recording against its transcription.

It would be absurd to argue that it should be jettisoned on account of its imperfections or, conversely, to resurrect the old trope that recordings are less reliable or valid sources than written ones. The latter argument rests on a positivist view of written documents, endowing them with an incontestable, almost inhuman facticity, even though written discourse is self-evidently as socially and individually constructed as oral remembrance. However, equally damaging is to idealise the human voice as somehow purer than written discourse...²⁷

Baum argues that the interview should serve as the historical context and the transcript provides historical accuracy; and goes on to suggest that one solution to the controversy between verbatim transcription and documenting themes discussed through edited transcription is to document the interview in both ways.²⁸ These irresolvable debates demonstrate the transcription’s interpretive and potentially contested nature and forces the oral historian to acknowledge that their active role in meaning-making rivals the meaning-making of the oral history itself.²⁹ In spite of these unresolved dilemmas, transcription has continued to be the primary method for scholars to access

²⁶ Karpf, Anne. “The human Voice and the Texture of Experience,” 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Baum, Willa K. 1977. *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

²⁹ Karpf, Anne. “The human Voice and the Texture of Experience,” 53.

oral histories, due to the ease of distribution, even though meaning is lost when voice is transferred to words on paper.

Referencing Frisch, Zembrzycki notes, “much is lost when voices turn to text. This shift is ‘extensive and controlling,’ as ‘there are worlds of meaning that lie beyond words.’”³⁰ This loss of meanings that lie beyond the words, such as when an interview crosses over into sarcasm or irony, is lost “because the cold type does not disclose the sarcasm evident only in an inflection of voice.”³¹ Not to mention, as Zembrzycki asks, what do “silences, stutters, emotions, and dropped conversation threads mean?”³² Karpf describes how feminist oral historians argue for the need to not only listen to their subjects statements, but their meta-statements, quoting Katheryn Anderson and Dana Jack, “we need to hear what women implied, suggested, and started to say but didn’t. We need to interpret their pauses and, when it happens, their unwillingness or inability to respond.”³³ The only way to experience, investigate, and interpret these patterns and their meanings is through the oral or video recording. As Williams illustrates, the intensity of the words spoken and laughter can add “another layer of knowing to the oral history;” that the “variations and performative aspects of the interview that we may marginalize” contribute a “richness and may reveal multiple levels of information in the oral history encounter.”³⁴ Williams additionally stresses that it must be acknowledged that “not everything has to be vocalized in order to be voiced or to relay meaning.”³⁵ The performative nature of

³⁰ Zembrzycki, Stacey. "Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews," 102.

³¹ Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience," 53-54. Karpf referencing Allan Nevins in "Oral History: how and why it was born; the uses of oral history," Dunaway and Baum, 1983, pg. 33.

³² Zembrzycki, Stacey. "Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews," 102.

³³ Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience," 54.

³⁴ Williams, Rhonda. 2001 "'I'm a Keeper of Information': History – Telling and Voice." *The Oral History Review* 28(1): 41-63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

history-telling cannot be disregarded, Williams quotes Tonkin's claim that "gesture, intonation, bodily stance and facial expressions are all cues, in the oral ambience, to topic orientation as well as to the speakers' claim to authority."³⁶ Portelli posits that the oral history provides an interpretive emotive personal perspective on historical experiences, not just memories of historical content, thus illustrating how individuals feel about the past and what the past means.³⁷ Additionally, the silences found within the oral history hold power and additive value to interpretation, as Foster shares, silences serve as an oral punctuation, and these "spaces within and between the narrator's monologue and the narrator and interviewer's dialogue, offers opportunities to think about the unspoken, about what lies beyond the confines of the conversation."³⁸ It is well established that analyzing the human voice poses considerable challenges; Norkunas argues that all interviews are different because all listeners are different, putting forward that "the listener negotiates what she can hear, must hear, hopes to know and cannot bear to know...empathetic listeners are ever sensitive" to body language, silences, detachment, and changes in voice pitch and timbre.³⁹ Karpf suggests that the oral historians rush to transcribe is motivated by the safety it provides, that we "know how to deal with written text, how to theorise it, analyze it, shape it. The oral and aural is much more indeterminate and elusive, and ultimately more frightening."⁴⁰

³⁶ Williams, Rhonda. "I'm a Keeper of Information': History – Telling and Voice," 43.

³⁷ Warren, Robert E., Maniscalco, Michael P., Schroeder, Erich K., Oliver, John S., Lambert, Sue Huitt Douglas, and Frisch, Michael. 2013. "Restoring the Human Voice to Oral History: The Audio-Video Barn Website." *The Oral History Review* 40 (1): 107-25. Referencing Alesandro Portelli in "What Makes History Different," in *The Death of Luigi Tratulli and Other Stories* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 45-58.

³⁸ Foster, Helen. "Finding Poetry in the Sound Archives: Creatively Repurposing Oral Histories for Re-Presentation and Engagement," 114.

³⁹ Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience," 53. Karpf referencing Martha Norkunas in Sheftel, Anna and Zembrzycki, Stacey (eds), *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013.

⁴⁰ Karpf, Anne. "The human Voice and the Texture of Experience," 54.

Issues around the accessibility and usability of oral histories have long been acknowledged; since the early years of involvement by the SAA, the Committee on Oral History demonstrated an understanding of findability issues adversely affecting the utilization of oral histories.⁴¹ However, as Cochrane states, oral historians have long been too concerned with recording practices rather than facilitating meaningful access.⁴² Frisch notes that in spite of oral history's definition as a recording of an audio interaction, few have paid much attention to the recordings; it is oral history's "deep dark secret."⁴³ However, Frisch asserts transcription as the document of record, long assumed as the only efficient means in which to work with and share oral histories, is no longer true in the digital age.⁴⁴ Swain observes that the technological advances confronting the archival field, from the tape recorder to the internet, have continually asked archivists to "redefine their responsibilities in broader terms."⁴⁵ Of all the challenges facing oral historians today, forefront is creating more effective means of recording, preserving, organizing, and disseminating oral histories to a large and expanding audience.⁴⁶ Frisch asks, "what happens when we see oral histories themselves in different terms – not as something to be mined and quarried for outputs, but as another kind of space to be explored and contemplated, which is just what the digital age makes possible?"⁴⁷ Zembrycki states that "it was never about 'if' but rather 'when' and 'how' we would begin to access the complex layers of meaning that

⁴¹ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. "Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask," 363.

⁴² Swain, Ellen D. "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," 152. Referencing Clive Cochrane in "Public Libraries and the Changing Nature of Oral History," *Audiovisual Librarian*, 11 (Autumn 1985), 205.

⁴³ Frisch, Michael. 2016. "Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked." *Australian Historical Studies* 47 (1): 92-107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁵ Swain, Ellen D. "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century," 148.

⁴⁶ Warren, Robert E., Maniscalco, Michael P., Schroeder, Erich K., Oliver, John S., Lambert, Sue Huitt Douglas, and Frisch, Michael. "Restoring the Human Voice to Oral History: The Audio-Video Barn Website," 108.

⁴⁷ Frisch, Michael. "Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked," 96.

our transcripts fail to capture.”⁴⁸ The impact of the instant accessibility that the internet makes capable cannot be overstated, Frisch states,

primary source oral history recordings were once hidden away in restricted collections in often inaccessible facilities, with few opportunities to access much less actually listen or view them. And now, routinely, even large collections of primary source oral history media can be posted to the web, accessible *in toto* to anyone, anywhere in the world, instantly.⁴⁹

The digital turn is allowing the oral recording to establish its primacy and to be embraced as the primary source document within an oral history collection.⁵⁰ The new-found accessibility provided by the internet, paired with digitization has, as Foster states, made oral histories more readily available and easier to work with, extending the shelf life of oral histories in the archive.⁵¹ This eliminates Zembrzycki’s assumption of the archival conundrum of oral histories sitting “in shoeboxes in closets and on dusty archive shelves,” and that, after the interview, these new technologies are altering the practitioner’s processes.⁵² Whether born digital or digitized after the fact; text, image, and sound have an equal footing as linkable and interchangeable digital formats. These files can be easily saved, moved, shared, searched, edited, and manipulated allowing digital oral histories to be worked with in a variety of different ways that were unavailable with previous analogue media. And as Thompson notes, “sophisticated digital indexing and cataloguing tools...will enable anyone, anywhere to make extraordinary and unexpected connections, using sound and image as well as text.”⁵³

⁴⁸ Zembrzycki, Stacey. "Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews," 99.

⁴⁹ Frisch, Michael. "Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked," 97.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵¹ Foster, Helen. "Finding Poetry in the Sound Archives: Creatively Repurposing Oral Histories for Re-Presentation and Engagement," 112.

⁵² Zembrzycki, Stacey. "Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews," 96.

⁵³ Thomson, Alistair. 2007. "Four Paradigm Transformation in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 34 (1): 49-70.

However, this new-found scale of accessibility has pitfalls, as Frisch illuminates, “access, especially large-scale universal access, does not mean meaningful access.”⁵⁴ Calling to mind, the common ‘shoebox’ reference, Frisch continues,

Everyone is familiar with the catch-all shoeboxes into which family photographs have been tossed for years. And photographs are relatively easy to rummage through, skim, select, and organize in little piles. Hour-long audio and video files, in contrast, take enormous time even to sample, based on whatever clues can be provided, and are impossible to audit or screen extensively...if everything in an expansive collection of material is posted to the web in forms and on a scale that make careful, targeted examination impossibly overwhelming, then access to what is needed and most meaningful can be very limited.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Zembrycki adds that differences in technological skill sets can account for a digital divide, that technology has to be “accessible and intuitive” and she rejects “tools that jeopardise the humanistic research principles that are at the heart of oral history research” and that “technology must be used in an informed manner, as means to an end and not an end in itself.”⁵⁶ By coupling the ease of creation of digital-born media with the new-found ability to digitize outdated formats, providing access to scores of previously unavailable or unusable oral histories on a scale unimagined, emphasizes the concerns raised by Frisch of unlimited access creating limits to accessibility, prompting Frisch to suggest that archivists must “broaden oral history ‘method’ to include not just generating interview data, but learning how to work with it actively in a range of ways.”⁵⁷ This broadening of oral history method translates directly into broader multimedia uses of documentation for production, research, and analysis. However, Frisch

⁵⁴ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁶ Zembrzycki, Stacey. “Bringing Stories to Life: Using New Media to Disseminate and Critically Engage with Oral History Interviews,” 99.

⁵⁷ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 95.

acknowledges the challenge posed in reimagining oral history content management in the digital age to make “access truly effective and meaningful.”⁵⁸

Digital or digitized oral history recordings facilitate exploration of the performative nuances and orality found within an interview, which is pivotal in placing the voice back into oral history. As Frisch hinted, the transcript no longer serves as the primary document of record in the digital age, however, paradoxically, one of the most widespread responses to oral history content management seems to have “made the transcript more useful and even requisite.”⁵⁹

Whereas digital access has given permission for oral history recordings to be viewed as the primary document, due to easily workable digital formats across long interviews and collections, the transcript has come to be viewed as a user-friendly means to navigate the large collections now accessible via powerful text-mining software. Thus, the transcript has not been displaced, but in ways, reinforced as “the default basis for much oral history digital content management.”⁶⁰

However, many oral histories are not transcribed and the cost to rectify this is as cost prohibitive as digitization can be, preventing accessibility of collections. Speech recognition and automated transcriptions, along with crowd sourcing transcription have been utilized as a means to circumvent the issue, but unfortunately these processes have their own issues that prevent them from being an effective solution.⁶¹ Conversely, limitations emerge with the usage of text searching within oral history transcripts, given that success relies on explicit word or term matching capabilities of the researcher. In the end, this “requires a lot of hit and miss guesswork on terms or tags that might track to content of interest.”⁶² However, Foster acknowledges that

⁵⁸ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 97.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶¹ For more on this, see Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 101.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 98.

the difficulties in navigating audio/video oral history files require some form of written navigational tool to assist the user.⁶³ Due to the fact that any given oral history contains diverse information and concepts that must be viewed in real time, meaningful review is time-sensitive, which accounts for much of the underutilization of oral history collections.⁶⁴ These obstacles have led archivists to explore alternative methods in mapping collections of oral histories that are less reliant on literal transcription.⁶⁵ One of the methods being utilized to facilitate more in-depth exploration of oral history files is time-coded summaries. These time-coded summaries contain an index that point to themes discussed, providing entry points within a given interview. This is beneficial to the end-user because, as Frisch points out, “people in interviews, after all, rarely say things like ‘here is a story about social construction of gender’. They just tell and comment on a story about their mother, or a classmate, or a relationship, or a military unit, or a factory floor, or a political or business meeting.”⁶⁶ Therefore it is necessary to have search tools that help researchers locate voices of interest. The Illinois State Museum’s Oral History of Illinois Agriculture (OHIA) project recognized the need to “go beyond the limits of Google-type searches, which constrain users to searching bodies of text for specific words or word combinations. Word searches, by definition, are limited to explicit nominal expressions and cannot be expected to track broader themes that may be of equal or greater interest.”⁶⁷ In order to locate abstract concepts within oral history dialogues, OHIA developed a system which uses digital indexing that relies on searchable metadata attached to linked files, allowing

⁶³ Foster, Helen. “Finding Poetry in the Sound Archives: Creatively Repurposing Oral Histories for Re-Presentation and Engagement,” 112.

⁶⁴ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 100.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁷ Warren, Robert E., Maniscalco, Michael P., Schroeder, Erich K., Oliver, John S., Lambert, Sue Huitt Douglas, and Frisch, Michael. “Restoring the Human Voice to Oral History: The Audio-Video Barn Website,” 110.

retrieval of “discrete audio or video files that contain brief segments or clips of interview recordings” pertaining to a certain topic.⁶⁸ This broader indexing fosters the capacity for exploration within themes found in oral history collections. The National Library of Australia additionally breaks audio/video files into smaller sections with concise summaries, which link “directly to corresponding audio passages; keywords and searches that then make it possible to reach specific content within and across interviews in a large collection.”⁶⁹ With this more precise navigation between different interviews containing parrel discussions, it is like utilizing “the index of not just one book, but a shelf of related books.”⁷⁰ Mapping that combines segmenting, summary annotation, and thematic tagging provides supplements and, in some cases, full alternatives to lexical searching.⁷¹ Frisch asserts that “among the many implications of this move beyond the transcript is the reachability of non-lexical communication, expression, affect, performance, and interaction – dimensions that the words of a transcript cannot begin to capture or represent.”⁷² Foster observes that an interview summary providing points of entry into the original recording fosters engagement with the medium, whereas the transcript transforms the listener into a reader. The use of a summary removes layers of editing, allowing for the recognition of the “voice at the heart of the oral history archive.”⁷³ Karpf observes that the ability to move within an interview by non-linear means due to digital platforms and innovative mapping and indexing, allows oral histories to retain auralty and overcome “its disadvantages, acquiring the pliability of text, as the differences between the written and the oral themselves

⁶⁸Warren, Robert E., Maniscalco, Michael P., Schroeder, Erich K., Oliver, John S., Lambert, Sue Huitt Douglas, and Frisch, Michael. “Restoring the Human Voice to Oral History: The Audio-Video Barn Website,” 110.

⁶⁹ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 98.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁷¹ Ibid., 101.

⁷² Ibid., 97.

⁷³ Foster, Helen. “Finding Poetry in the Sound Archives: Creatively Repurposing Oral Histories for Re-Presentation and Engagement,” 112-113.

begin to evanesce. Everything becomes data.”⁷⁴ Thus, creative utilization of indexing and mapping is allowing users of oral histories to go beyond specific query-driven searches and “explore, wander, discover, follow hunches, bump into, and discover things you never knew you were looking for.”⁷⁵

The long-held practice of transcribing oral histories has demonstratively fostered varied and alternating purposes and repercussions affecting the usability and accessibility of oral history collections. Due to the extent that the written word is provided a higher authority, the voice, which is the one required element of the oral history, had been inadvertently silenced. Karpf describes the frequent reference to the “oral” in academic discourse as referring only to the means through which material was collected and that to “a great extent the written form today has a greater legitimating power than the spoken.”⁷⁶ The outcome of the written word marginalizing the voice, by oral historians historically placing a higher weight to the transcription of oral histories, reflects and reinforces Western cultural beliefs and prejudices and contributes to, and is illustrative of, the displacement of oral societies by literate ones.⁷⁷ It is important to understand, as Dunaway points out, that with transcription, “we as much re-create as translate,” that the “special problem with translation is that we often translate words when we mean to translate meanings.”⁷⁸ The transcript should not be viewed as absolutely accurate, as Dunaway asks, “accurate to what—to written or oral form? To what was said, or what was recorded?”⁷⁹ The divergence between oral and written expression is natural and should be acknowledged. The oral history interview should no longer be viewed, as Williams argues,

⁷⁴ Karpf, Anne. “The Human Voice and the Texture of Experience,” 54.

⁷⁵ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 102.

⁷⁶ Karpf, Anne. “The Human Voice and the Texture of Experience,” 51.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁸ Dunaway, David King. “Transcription: Shadow or Reality?” 116.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

simply as a recording and its corresponding transcription, “a thread of words that we endow with meaning,” and by practitioners of the oral history method familiarizing themselves with the “ever-growing theoretical questions and techniques of oral histories as a field and a genre, and as vigilant listeners and observers, we can and should make better use of oral histories.”⁸⁰ The digital turn of the 21st century is transforming the oral history, creating greater accessibility and usability, initiating creative practices in mapping and indexing to assist the end-user in exploring more freely and intently within interviews and overarching collections, as well as providing the means to return the voice back to the oral history, placing the words back into their spoken context. As Cambrice, Earles, and Robinson state, “contemporary oral history projects should be measured by accessibility, discovery, engagement, usability, reuse, and a project’s impact on both community and scholarship” and that academics, archivists, and museum professionals now have the resources and skill sets to present oral histories to a larger audience through “technologically driven ways to research, preserve, and house historical artifacts.”⁸¹ Oral histories are beginning to live up to the ideal of addressing archival silences, for countering the actions of the powerful in denying marginal groups ability to form social memory and history, by providing ever-increasing access and usability, co-creatorship, and co-descriptive authorship. Additionally, digitized analogue interviews provide the opportunity for new interpretations of previously recorded oral history materials, furthering Foster’s sentiment of extending the shelf life of oral histories in the archive.⁸² It will be imperative that archivists continually recognize

⁸⁰ Williams, Rhonda. “‘I’m a Keeper of Information’: History – Telling and Voice,” 42.

⁸¹ Robinson, Marco, Farrah Gafford Cambrice, and Phyllis Earles. 2017. “Telling the Stories of Forgotten Communities: Oral History, Public Memory, and Black Communities in the American South.” *Collections” A Journal. For Museum and Archives Professionals*, no. 2: 171.

⁸² For an interesting example of revisiting oral histories for new interpretations, clinical psychologists and Vietnam veterans revisit decades old oral histories with “shared authority” to identify instances of moral injury, see Napoli, Philp F., Brinson, Thomas, Kenny, Neil, and Furey, Joan. 2019. “Oral History, Moral Injury, and Vietnam Veterans.” *Oral History Review* 46 (1): 71-103.

that the digital divide will continue to present a barrier to accessibility, especially in rural and under-privileged communities. As Walker points out, the lack of broadband internet access has necessitated public programming that incorporates digital oral histories to ensure the digital divide is addressed.⁸³ Continued creativity and scholarly discourse will be key in providing examples of successful initiatives to provide frameworks for addressing the varied issues and opportunities facing the practice of the oral history in the 21st century. I believe, as the SAA Committee on Oral History stated in 1973, in the continued importance of examining “certain assumptions that people have used almost automatically in formulating their attitudes towards oral history” and to ensure continued stimulation of “more thoughtful and orderly discussion of the field of oral history.”⁸⁴ And lastly, to remember Frisch’s assertion that,

for all the wonders of the digital technology, for all the complexity of process and meaning in oral history documents, for all the seriousness of purpose for which the perspectives and evidence of oral histories are needed – doing oral history in the digital age is becoming steadily more participatory, open-ended, instrumentally usable, and...fun.⁸⁵

⁸³ Walker, William S. 2016. “Sparking Rural Community Dialogues with Digital Oral Histories.” *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archive Professionals*, no. 4: 401-408.

⁸⁴ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. “Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask,” 361.

⁸⁵ Frisch, Michael. “Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked,” 107.