"Connecting to the Ideologies That Surround Us": Oral History Stewardship as an Entry Point to Critical Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom

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Abstract: In this article I argue that oral history stewardship, as a mode of digital archival practice, offers a useful entry point into understanding and engaging with critical theory in the humanities. I survey recent scholarship to propose that the practical conditions of digital oral history archiving inform the most theoretically engaged work in the field of archival practice today. Through a discussion of a collaboration between the spring 2015 undergraduate English class I taught at Southwestern University and the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP) oral history collection at the University of Texas Libraries Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI), I argue that in a higher-education setting, the practical experience of digital archival stewardship clarifies a theoretical understanding of the features of responsible community engagement.

Keywords: community engagement, critical race theory, digital humanities, feminist studies, postcustodial archives, undergraduate education

In response to a dearth of collections on women, communities of color, and other marginalized groups in university archives, the social history movement of the 1960s and 1970s adopted oral history methods to create a more inclusive historical record from a grassroots perspective. Since it emerged to counter the

elitism of the academy, the field of oral history has created rich archives of community-generated memory. In part as a result of oral history's grassroots methods, and in part as a result of the field's historically critical orientation to archival custody, oral historians are often the primary creators and stewards of their own research collections.[1] The roles of scholar, interviewer, and audio/visual archivist may overlap; sometimes, all three roles unite in one practitioner. In the case of Alessandro Portelli's seminal *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*, for instance, Portelli's method of collecting 200 oral history tapes is almost as important as the content of those tapes.[2] As Portelli theorizes in "Research as an Experiment in Equality," the oral historian "has an objective stake in equality, as a condition for less distorted communication and a less biased collection of data."[3] Portelli must work towards what he terms a "mutual sighting" in order to build trust with the narrators whose testimony he seeks to record.[4] Equality is thus both an ethical and a methodological value in oral history practice.

The notion that oral histories are intersubjective—that is, that they are creatively coconstructed by interviewer and narrator—was a useful entry point to critical theory for the undergraduate English class, Freedom and Imprisonment in the American Literary Tradition, which I taught in Spring 2015 at Southwestern University.[5] During a collaboration with the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP) oral history collection at the University of Texas Libraries Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI), students had opportunities to study both the contents and the stewardship contexts of oral history collections.[6] In the process, they saw firsthand the ways in which knowledge, meaning, and identity are socially constructed. As part of their course work, these students read widely in literature while digitally archiving approximately fifteen hours of oral history testimony. Cross listed with feminist studies and race and ethnicity studies, the course paid attention to such topics as detention and US foreign policy, feminist abolitionism, and the historic role of Texas in the US imprisonment regime. The utility of oral history to illuminate and respond to histories of inequality is well established, so exploring oral history collections such as the Rule of Law Oral History Project and the Texas After Violence Project oral history collection was a

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[1] For instance, in Donald A. Ritchie's *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), a chapter titled "Preserving Oral History in Archives and Libraries" appears alongside the chapters "Setting Up an Oral History Project," "Conducting Interviews," and "Videotaping Oral History." This table of contents reflects the fact that preservation considerations are often of a piece with an oral historian's practical responsibilities in coordinating and conducting interviews.

[2] Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[3] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 31.

[4] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli.*

[5] See Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2015) for a treatment of intersubjectivity in oral history.

[6] Texas After Violence Project collection at the Human Rights Documentation Initiative, http://av.lib.utexas.edu/index.php?title=Category:Texas_After_Violence_Project.

natural direction in which to extend our coursework. Yet in addition to *listening* to oral histories, collaborating with archivists at the Human Rights Documentation Initiative to *digitally archive* these oral histories provided a practical immersion in aspects of critical theory. In the process of digitally archiving oral histories, students grasped principles including multiplicity, counternarrative, self-reflexivity, and the contingent, constructed nature of historical and literary narratives. As I show in the pages to follow, training students in digital history stewardship is an effective way to practice theoretically informed pedagogy.

Oral History Stewardship, Visible Archives, and Theoretically Informed Pedagogy

Oral history stewardship enables theoretically informed pedagogy in several unique ways. I offer this article in part as a response to recent concerns about a rift between scholars and archivists; these concerns have implications for the intersection of archival theory and practice at the heart of the pedagogical model I elaborate here. Lauren F. Klein, Lisa Darms, and Kate Eichhorn all use the term *invisible* to describe the labor of the archivist from the perspective of the scholar.[7] Klein considers that "as scholars, we do not see the labor involved in . . . the development of the encoding standards and database design that allows us to perform our search queries. . . . This digital labor remains not only invisible, but also unacknowledged by most humanities scholars."[8] In an editorial introduction to issue no. 5 of *Archive Journal*, archivist Darms reinforces the point that archival processes and practices remain "invisible to the theorists most likely to write about [them]," while coeditor Eichhorn validates concerns archivists have expressed about "their invisibility in contemporary scholarly, activist, and artistic discourses on archives."[9] Eichhorn regrets that the archival turn (so expertly theorized in her own seminal book on the topic in terms of feminist studies) is enacted by academics in such a way as to "celebrate 'the archive' and all the things that 'the archive' apparently encompasses (politics, desire, longing, death, memory, history, and list goes on) in lieu of grappling with the material questions that archival practices invariably raise."[10]

Crucially, Klein, Darms, and Eichhorn advocate values of inclusion by insisting on the visibility of archival labor. Certainly, scholars must cultivate awareness of

[7] See Lauren F. Klein, "The Image of Absence: Archival Silence, Data Visualization, and James Hemings," *American Literature* 58, no. 4 (2013): 661–688; Lisa Darms, "Radical Archives: Introduction by Lisa Darms," *Archive Journal* no. 5 (2015), http://www.archivejournal.net/issue/5/archives-remixed/; and Kate Eichhorn, "Radical Archives: Introduction by Kate Eichhorn," *Archive Journal* no. 5 (2015), http://www.archivejournal.net/issue/5/archives-remixed/.

[8] Klein, "The Image of Absence," 683.

[9] Darms and Eichhorn, "Radical Archives."

[10] See Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013); Eichhorn, "Radical Archives."

and respect for the labor that enables access to oral history collections and other archives as the raw material of scholarly inquiry. Yet it is also necessary to recognize the theoretical contributions that the field of oral history stewardship, as an important branch of archival stewardship at large, has to make to theoretically informed research and pedagogy in the humanities and related disciplines. The notion that archivists operate "outside academe," as Eichhorn terms it, fails to account for a growing field of scholarship—much of it focused on oral history—produced by archivists and associated archives and library staff.[11] I resist the idea that the material conditions and practical pressures of archival stewardship are at a distance from unique theoretical perspectives on the scope and significance of the archive. On the contrary, it is exactly these material conditions that inform some of the most theoretically engaged work in the field of archival practice today, with implications for theoretically informed pedagogy.

Chiefly, scholarship around postcustodial archival practice intersects significantly with the digital humanities, race and ethnicity studies, and feminist studies, among other fields. Postcustodial archiving rests on an understanding of equality hinging on access and representation: postcustodial archiving pairs community holders of valuable archives with archivists' experience and resources to facilitate preservation on site and allow custody of the materials to remain within the community of provenance.[12] The postcustodial approach, in its emphasis on stewardship rather than ownership of collections, represents a significant break from the tradition of archival custody; whereas *custody* connotes physical guardianship, legal responsibility, and a one-time transfer of collections from originator to archive, *stewardship* connotes an ongoing collaborative relationship in which a repository manages but does not own a community's archives. Introducing students to the postcustodial approach through readings such as the essay collection *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*, which prominently features oral history projects throughout, has clear relevance for theoretically informed pedagogy.[13]

The essential takeaway from *Through the Archival Looking Glass* and the body of scholarship it represents is that the theory and practicalities of postcustodial digital oral history stewardship are entwined. Such stewardship diverges from traditional notions of archival custody and poses new logistical and technical challenges. Increasingly, academic libraries support postcustodial digital initiatives, such as the Human Rights Documentation Initiative at the University

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[11] Eichhorn, "Radical Archives."

[12] "Postcustodial Theory of Archives," *Society of American Archivists Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, accessed December 15, 2015, http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/postcustodial-theory-of-archives.

[13] Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal, eds., *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2014).

of Texas at Austin Libraries, by providing server space for large collections of audiovisual primary source material. The HRDI, which hosts collections pertaining to issues of human rights internationally, digitally stewards, for instance, the Texas After Violence Project oral history collection, the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, and the Free Burma Rangers Collection, which includes several hundreds of hours of digital video documentation of humanitarian movements supporting internally displaced people in Southeast Asia. All three of these collections center on or feature oral history archives. The postcustodial approach behind such collections shifts the stakes of archival accountability so that, as archives scholar Michelle Caswell puts it, "archives . . . are ultimately responsible to the community, and not to an individual donor, a larger parent organization, or an elite board of trustees."[14] According to this model, "state actors, politicians, journalists, and academic researchers" are archival stakeholders, but oral history initiatives such as those stewarded by the HRDI are primarily responsible to the community of provenance.[15]

How have such oral history initiatives sought to hold themselves accountable to contributing narrators over time? These histories anchor theoretically informed oral history pedagogy. In the field of oral history, archiving practices have long been informed by feminist and critical race theories emerging from the humanities and social sciences. The ethical value of equality articulated by Portelli anchors not only the content aims of oral history, but also the contexts in which oral histories are preserved and distributed. Some oral history initiatives emerging from the social history movement refused to be incorporated in institutionally affiliated archives, citing conditions of patriarchy and exclusion. As one notable example, the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) stewards approximately 3000 oral history tapes on-site in a Brooklyn residence, specifically *not* in university or government-supported archives. According to the LHA Statement of Purpose, this is to ensure that the archives remains accountable and accessible to the community whose history it documents: "The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women."[16] Its physical disconnection from the academy notwithstanding, the LHA's stewardship context shares with areas of humanities study a critical take on access and power. In recent years, the advent of the postcustodial approach in archival theory has allowed for productive partnerships of university archives and information services with community oral history initiatives such as the LHA; since 2008, the LHA has collaborated with the Pratt Institute

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[14] Michelle Caswell, "Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach to Records Documenting Human Rights Abuse: Lessons from Community Archives," *Archival Science* 14 (2014): 312.

[15] Caswell, "Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach," 316.

[16] "History and Mission," Lesbian Herstory Archives, accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.lesbianherstoryarch ives.org/history.html#mission.

School of Information to digitize its Spoken Word Collection.[17] Such partnerships as the LHA's with Pratt raise the visibility of archival labor to the forefront of critical theory in practice. Creating opportunities for students to explore and discuss evolving histories of archival stewardship is an important way to implement theoretically engaged oral history pedagogy.

Along with the concept of postcustodial stewardship, fresh takes on archival provenance informed by critical theory form an important framework for theoretically informed pedagogy. Whereas the Society of American Archivists traditionally defines provenance somewhat narrowly as "referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection," archives theorists Joel Wurl and Michelle Caswell advocate a broader understanding of archival provenance as an "environment of originating context" that might encompass a community.[18] Wurl's work on ethnicity and Caswell's on survivor status as forms of provenance paralleled the interdisciplinarity at work in our class. Questions about how, as a nation, we conceptualize justice, and how this is reflected in fictional narratives and other literatures, guided our inquiry over the course of the semester. Rather than organizing the reading list by literary period, genre, or canon, in planning the course I adopted what Caswell situates as a "key community archives principle"—"multiplicity of both format and perspective."[19] Students explored intersections between criminal justice and histories of inequality in fiction, poetry, documentary film, sociology, autobiography, and other text and media genres.

Yet engaging with Texas After Violence Project oral histories was by far the most effective interaction students had with principles of critical theory. In our class, the very process of "grappling with the material questions [of] archival practices" exposed students to the ethics and politics of archival provenance, which in turn meaningfully informed our examination of analogous issues of representation, privilege, and inequality in literature.[20] Digitally archiving oral histories provided an intimate engagement with the theoretical notion that values and ideology are embedded in both individual narratives—whether fictional stories or unmediated oral histories—and in collections of narratives such as the TAVP collection.

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[17] "Using the Archives," Lesbian Herstory Archives, accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/digital.html.

[18] "Provenance," *Society of American Archivists Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, accessed December 15, 2015, http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/provenance#.VypQqWQrJE4; see page 69 in Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues* 29, no. 1 (2005): 65-76.

[19] Caswell, "Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach," 313.

[20] Caswell, "Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach," 313.

"Connecting to the Ideologies That Surround Us": The Texas After Violence Project, Oral History Stewardship, and the Digital Humanities Classroom

Archival practice, whether focused on oral histories or other archival materials, has long encompassed scholarly and teaching components. However, the designation in 2012 of an annual pedagogy issue in the *Oral History Review*, as well as recent pedagogically focused articles in *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage*, *American Archivist*, and *Libraries and the Academy*, suggest increasingly important roles for archives and archival stewardship practices in higher education. In "Indexing as Oral History Research: Using OHMS to 'Compose History' in the Writing Classroom," Douglas A. Boyd, Janice W. Fernheimer, and Rachel Dixon detail classroom projects using the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), an open-source application developed at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries.[21] The OHMS allows users to map thematic and contextual concepts to natural language in order to enhance discoverability of vast collections of audio and audiovisual oral histories. Boyd, Fernheimer, and Dixon suggest that involving undergraduates in projects to index oral histories using the OHMS allows students to grasp the interpretive nature of metadata creation, which is an important exercise in critical thinking. Jill Goodman Gould and Gail Gradowski, in "Using Online Video Oral Histories to Engage Students in Authentic Research," indicate that guiding students in incorporating oral histories in multimedia projects provides an engaging exposure to primary sources that equips students with skills in information literacy and primary source research—both areas marked by experts as priorities in twenty-first-century higher education.[22] And in the introduction to the indispensable volume, *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement,* Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson emphasize that participating in oral history initiatives provides students with opportunities to hone skills in collaboration and curation, both key principles of digital humanities practice.[23] The educator, archivist, and librarian scholars cited here demonstrate that oral history stewardship effectively builds skills in the key areas of critical thinking, information literacy, digital literacy, and primary source research.

A related body of scholarship points out the utility of digital oral history stewardship methods not only for teaching, but for community-driven research

[21] Douglas A. Boyd, Janice W. Fernheimer, and Rachel Dixon, "Indexing as Oral History Research: Using OHMS to 'Compose History' in the Writing Classroom," *Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (2015): 352-367.

[22] Jill Goodman Gould and Gail Gradowski, "Using Online Video Oral Histories to Engage Students in Authentic Research," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 341-350.

[23] Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson, "Introduction," *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014): 1-16.

as well. Boyd and Larson note the shared emphasis on community engagement in digital humanities and oral history, thus positioning oral history stewardship as singularly suited for both digital humanities research and pedagogy; they observe that the connections between oral history and the digital humanities are "clear and abundant. In fact, three of the tenets oral historians hold most dear—collaboration, a democratic impulse, and public scholarship—are also three of the leading concerns often cited by digital humanists."[24] In a special issue of *New American Notes Online*, titled "Digital Humanities, Public Humanities," Elise Chenier makes a strong case for the continuum between the digital and public humanities as she historicizes the role of oral history in community-engaged humanities practice. Chenier offers that the oral history movement of the 1970s emerged specifically to "counter formal, elite knowledge with organic knowledge—to break through the walls of academe and the scholarly world, to legitimate and create a place and space for the knowledge that arises from everyday experience."[25] T-Kay Sangwand builds on Chenier's narrative from an archives perspective in her contribution to the edited volume, *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*.[26] She surveys the history of US archival appraisal theory to show that emergent oral history methodologies directly challenged the custodial authority of the archival institution.[27] Sangwand's case study documents Cuban hip-hop as a form of "oral and performance-based memory-making" that represents "a participatory archival paradigm more aligned with [communities'] sense of memory and history," and that is less determined by the "hegemonic textuality" of top-down archival records appraisal.[28] Both Sangwand and Chenier articulate the value of deconstructing institutional authority in favor of community-generated oral memory.[29] This value comports with the public scholarship values inherent to the digital humanities.

Oral history stewardship, then, is an effective conduit to theoretically engaged pedagogy. To demonstrate this, I turn to a discussion of my spring 2015 English class, Freedom and Imprisonment in the American Literary Tradition. In order for students to achieve a strong understanding of how literature reflects the many ways in which prison systems interact with gender, racial, and

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[24] Boyd and Larson, "Introduction," 10.

[25] Elise Chenier, "Oral History and Open Access: Fulfilling the Promise of Democratizing Knowledge," *New American Notes Online* 5 (July 2014), http://www.nanocrit.com/issues/5/oral-history-and-open-access-fulfilling-promise-democratizing-knowledge/.

[26] T-Kay Sangwand, "Revolutionizing the Archival Record through Rap: Cuban Hip Hop and Its Implications for Reorienting the Archival Paradigm," in *Through the Archival Looking Glass*, 91-107.

[27] Sangwand, "Revolutionizing the Archival Record," 94-95.

[28] Sangwand, "Revolutionizing the Archival Record," 97, 106, and 95.

[29] Recent digital projects such as Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, accessed April 13, 2017, http://www.antievictionmap.com/, and the Forced Trajectory Project, accessed April 13, 2017, http://www.forcedtrajectory.com/, are compelling examples of community-driven oral history efforts to uncover patterns of structural inequality.

economic inequality, both historically and today, our class interpreted literary texts alongside oral histories, prison writing, and other ostensibly unmediated texts. In this scenario, we read fictional and poetic works such as Emily Dickinson's poem 384, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Junot Díaz's "Aurora," and the collection *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, as well as nonfiction texts such as prison essays at the American Prison Writing Archive and *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* by feminist scholar and prison abolitionist Angela Davis.[30] Collectively, these texts bear dynamic witness to forms of racial discrimination, state violence, and theories of criminal justice.

As part of their work for the class, students had opportunities not only to analyze but also to enhance discoverability of the Texas After Violence Project oral history collection. The TAVP is an Austin-based nonprofit organization that collects oral histories from people across Texas who have been affected by the death penalty; the oral histories are hosted and made publicly available by the University of Texas at Austin Libraries Human Rights Documentation Initiative. The TAVP provides a forum where people and communities affected by criminal justice policies and practices can offer testimony and, in the process, contribute to a more expansively representative historical record. The motto of the TAVP— "Listening for a Change"—indicates the TAVP's goal of influencing public discourse through oral testimony; narrators represented in the TAVP collections range from family members of crime victims, to family members of people who are incarcerated, to religious leaders, lawyers, and prison administrators. Far from claiming neutral objectivity as an archives initiative, the TAVP aims to stimulate and inform public discourse about the death penalty in Texas. However, the TAVP does not identify with specific political positions for or against the death penalty or other controversial issues around the criminal justice system; rather, it makes available a diversity of individual testimonies that speak to these issues and many others. It is, therefore, an invaluable teaching resource for a class on the far-reaching, complex, and intergenerational effects of US imprisonment practices and histories.

Viewed holistically, the TAVP oral history collection manifests the value of counternarrative, which anchors critical race theory. Archives scholars such as Caswell and Dunbar argue that an emphasis on counternarrative should be adopted across the archives field. Caswell holds that including multiple viewpoints across archival collections like the TAVP oral history collection is necessary to "allow space for contestation, disagreement, and debate rather than reify[ing]

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[30] Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 183; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Junot Díaz, "Aurora," in *Drown* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 47-65; Marc Falkoff, *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007); the American Prison Writing Archive, accessed April 14, 2017, http://apw.dhini tiative.org/; Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2012).

singular or dominant metanarratives."[31] Dunbar adds that this approach is crucial to "construct a broader reality" alternative to "those constructed through social institutions of dominant culture."[32] Analyzing the TAVP oral history collection both as an entity and in terms of the individual perspectives that constitute it, students gained insight into selecting and collecting oral histories as inherently values-driven social justice practices. This fostered their understanding of yet another principle of critical race theory that Dunbar identifies as usefully applied to archival practice: the refusal of "objective historical truth" in favor of "multiple truths" that are "most expressive for underrepresented or disenfranchised populations."[33] Our class's initial exploration of the TAVP oral history collection, then, provided a direct encounter with the contingent, constructed nature of history—an important learning outcome to which I will return presently.

The students' first activity with the TAVP oral history collection entailed selecting, listening to, and blogging about a TAVP oral history interview. After identifying an interview that particularly interested them, students embarked on the listening process, filling out a Close-Listening Worksheet in order to facilitate analyses of the interviews, which in turn inspired reflective posts on our class blog.[34] In their blog posts responding to the TAVP listening process, students reflected on the interviews, raised important questions, and made observations about how the interviews connect with course readings.[35] Students found that the oral histories offered striking, granular instances of broad phenomena—concepts of punitive versus restorative justice and the historic continuum between slavery and criminal justice in Texas and the US at large—that we were encountering in other course texts.

By means of the close-listening exercise, students deepened their familiarity with the scope, content, and significance of the TAVP, which primed them for in-class task sessions to enhance access to TAVP holdings. During five sessions over the course of the semester, students participated in transcription, auditing, formatting, and digital archiving tasks for a total of five TAVP oral history interviews that were not yet publicly available on the HRDI website. During the first of our task sessions, Kathryn Darnall, HRDI digital asset management intern at the time, Skyped in to our class to provide an in-depth, hands-on orientation to the GLIFOS software, the digital archiving and preservation software used at the HRDI. With the gracious permission and support of Darnall and T-Kay Sangwand, HRDI human rights archivist at the time, all students in the class were granted

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[31] Caswell, "Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach," 319.

[32] Anthony W. Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 114.

[33] Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory," 122.

[34] This worksheet asks students to apply literary close-reading skills such as summary, identification of main ideas, identification of significant passages, and analysis of formal features to oral history narratives.

[35] At the beginning of the semester, each student completed and signed a Social Media Privacy Agreement to set the terms of his/her social media engagement in the class. All references to specific student blog posts are made with permission.

usernames, passwords, and editing privileges in the HRDI TAVP collection. On GLIFOS, students could sync finalized transcripts with interview videos, input abstracts and tables of contents for interviews, and complete metadata fields to indicate interview creators and contributors, geographic foci, and intellectual property rights. In the process of creating and syncing interview transcripts, students not only prepared the collections for research by rendering interviews searchable by keyword; they made the TAVP oral histories more accessible to hearing-impaired users as well.

Working collaboratively to transcribe oral history interviews and create accompanying tables of contents and keywords, students developed a deep appreciation of the content of the oral histories they archived. In "The Secret of Good Humanities Teaching," Julius Taranto and Kevin J.H. Dettmar suggest that "good humanities pedagogy . . . is largely teaching the skill of rereading"—that is, the skill of discerning "how much is there if you know how to look."[36] In our class, transcription was of a piece with our humanities practice of slow, close, deep reading.[37] In a reflective blog post, student Emma McDaniel described the digital archiving process as an active, "physical" mode of close-reading that, as an alternative to passive consumption, provided "a valuable avenue to deal with texts in a new way." In literature classes, she wrote, "often times it is hard to engage with a text and read every, single, word. But when transcribing, auditing, or syncing a narrative, it is almost necessary to overly pay attention to every word." Another student, Morgan Swindell, detailed how transcription and syncing processes enabled her to connect with the content of an oral history by a family member of a crime victim. "One thing that surprised me was how close I managed to get to the content through this . . . work. . . . [The oral history] was full of thoughtful responses and deep reflections about the prison system in general, particularly about restorative justice and mediation." Swindell noted that while a previous course reading provided persuasive evidence in support of the restorative justice model, the oral history narrative was even more compelling because the narrator demonstrated, by means of her own gripping story, "how healing the mediation process can truly be for both the victims and perpetrators." McDaniel and Swindell demonstrate that the active process of digitally archiving an oral history narrative enables insights into what Elinor Mazé, in her treatment of metadata construction in higher education, terms the *aboutness* of a given oral history.[38] Digitally archiving oral histories, then, is an effective route

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[36] Julius Taranto and Kevin J.H. Dettmar, "The Secret of Good Humanities Teaching," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 14, 2015, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Secret-of-Good-Humanities/233097/.

[37] This transcription-as-close-reading worksheet guides students in articulating how their interpretation of an oral history changes and evolves between their initial encounter with an oral history and their transcription of it.

[38] Elinor Mazé, "Deconstruction without Destruction: Creating Metadata for Oral History in a Digital World," in *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement*, ed. Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 151.

toward close reading and identifying the essence of a narrative, both significant goals of humanities study.

Mazé's conception of "aboutness" also provides a useful framework for thinking about digital archiving as inherently deconstructionist. As Mazé explains, "Any metadata which documents the what-is-this-about . . . of an object is always generated from a point of view. . . . Creating metadata is a process of deconstruction; that process will always be indelibly marked by the person who does it, and it will never be static across contexts and time."[39] Students in our class generated metadata, including keywords, oral history descriptions, and tables of contents. In the process, they grew attuned to the fact that the metadata bore the markers of their own interpretation of what was significant about a given oral history. As part of her reflection on the active rather than passive nature of archiving an oral history narrative, Swindell noted, "I was not simply taking in information; I was interpreting it and forming new information." In an essay on oral history as pedagogy, Marjorie L. McLellan documents how students' awareness of the constructed nature of their own archiving work translates into a heightened awareness of how dramatically "context, contingency, personalities, interests, and other forces shape both the past and the historical evidence."[40] For students in the class, participating in the nuts and bolts of history and memory making revealed how vulnerable archival records description is to bias, but also how productively narratives can be analyzed to reveal, as Swindell put it, "the ideologies that surround us."

Digitally archiving TAVP oral histories therefore equipped our class to deconstruct the ideologies at play within a single oral history and across an oral history collection. As we engaged with themes of criminal justice and human rights, the archiving process also prepared us to deconstruct values in narrative at large. Our class's work with the TAVP enabled us to appreciate the unique access into narrators' perspectives made possible by oral histories. At the same time, we thought critically about the ways in which narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, can advocate particular social, political, and legal values. For example, how does the episodic structure of a novel like Ellison's *Invisible Man* convey the recurrent exclusion of African Americans from legal protection? How does an oral history with the son of the first man executed by lethal injection in Texas convey the intergenerational impacts of capital sentencing? Read comparatively, what positions do these narratives take on US law and criminal justice?

Digital archiving thus sharpened students' abilities to compare how course texts narrate shifting ideologies with regard to US criminal justice; to detail the stories these texts tell about how criminal justice policies and practices impact

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[39] Mazé, "Deconstruction," 151.
[40] Marjorie L. McLellan, "Beyond the Transcript: Oral History as Pedagogy," in *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 104.

people and communities inside prisons and beyond; and to articulate the power of narrative to establish, sustain, overturn, or transform widely held assumptions about prisons and the imprisoned. One student blogged, reflecting on the semester, "I see narrative in everything that we have read and watched and listened to. I learned a great deal about how the narratives Americans are exposed to about imprisonment and punishment have a great impact on how we view prison—views that I saw in myself, and that have definitely impacted the way that I think about punishment in general." This self-reflexivity is also evidenced in a blog post by Marianne Brown, who wrote that the first time she listened to the TAVP oral history she would transcribe, "I found myself enjoying [the narrator's] story, questioning his motives, finding places where his activism plays into other systems of power that I have been taught about, and absorbing the story but not being changed by it." However, Brown writes,

> After auditing and syncing this interview I found a new take on it entirely. The places that I would write off from his story because it doesn't align with my experience (whether seeming unbelievable or merely not recognizable), in the end became the parts that really stretched me a lot. . . . Normally, I would only listen to a long video such as this over and over again if I wanted to remember it, share it, somehow take ownership of it. But what I found with [this] interview was that I engaged with the story not because I wanted to *use* it, but because it was a voice that mattered and it was my job to listen.

The self-reflexivity demonstrated in these blog posts shows how effectively oral history stewardship tasks teach students how to engage ethically with another's perspective. As Brown came to understand it, ethical engagement centers on the responsibility to cede mastery of a narrative, letting go of the impulse to react, in favor of listening. This is not to say that Brown ceded all agency when it came to the oral history narrative; on the contrary, for Brown and other students in the class, the experience of processing oral histories resulted in a dynamic stewardship relationship with those narratives. But it was a nonappropriative mode of engaging with narrators' stories. Students could take pride in enhancing access to a given narrative without claiming ownership over that narrative. Their critically informed agency as stewards rather than owners of narrative mirrors the ethical shift from custody to stewardship in postcustodial archives theory.

Conclusion

If the central question, as Lisa Darms formulates it—"How we can become better collaborators?"—guides postcustodial archival practice, it is clear that digital oral history stewardship has something to offer the community-engaged digital

humanities classroom not only in terms of digital skill-building, but also in terms of education in critical theory.[41] Certainly, feminist and critical race theoretical perspectives provide useful guidance for reading archives against the grain, between the lines, and with an eye to perspectives that are not represented. This approach inspires oral history projects that center historically marginalized voices. It also allows archivists and scholars to contend with the legacy of archives as representing the interests of groups that dominate in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, and such. Indeed, Anne J. Gilliland and Anthony W. Dunbar argue that such theoretical training is necessary for archivists to understand the stakes of archival inclusion and exclusion.[42] If the archives field has much to gain from engaging with critical theory, by the same token, students in the digital humanities have much to gain from the experience of archival stewardship as critical theory in practice. Training digital humanities students in postcustodial oral history stewardship provides them with opportunities to apply the theoretical principles they are learning to an immediate context in class. This process disambiguates the abstractions of critical theory.

Our class's collaboration with the TAVP demonstrates that the practical experience of digital archival stewardship clarifies the theoretical underpinnings of responsible community engagement. As they theorized ethical engagement with diverse perspectives, students made substantive contributions to TAVP's mission. Gabriel Solis, executive director of the TAVP, remarks,

> As a small nonprofit organization with limited resources, the Texas After Violence Project depends on dedicated interns and volunteers to help process interviews in ways that meet professional and ethical standards. Like many other community-based oral history projects, the TAVP struggles to balance its core mission of documenting stories and the extensive amount of work involved in processing interviews from transcription and audit-editing to creating metadata once the interview has been submitted to our digital repository. This sometimes results in a sizable backlog of unprocessed oral histories that, sadly, are forced to sit idly in our office until they can be processed and finally shared publicly. This is why collaborations with educators are so vital to the TAVP. Having students engage

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[41] Lisa Darms, "Radical Archives."

[42] Gilliland encourages archival studies students to enroll in courses in a variety of disciplines as preparation to "employ multiple frameworks such as those developed in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, and critical race studies as lenses through which to examine archives and records-related phenomena"; see Anne J. Gilliland, "Pluralizing Archival Education: A Non-Zero-Sum Proposition," in *Through the Archival Looking Glass,* 259. Dunbar adds that such training is necessary to "raise social and professional consciousness of implicit racial bias" in the archives field, which in turn enables "a diversified archival epistemology that can influence the creation of collective and institutional memories that impact underrepresented and disenfranchised populations"; see Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory," 109.

with our interviews and help process them along the way is an invaluable resource to the project.

In addition to advancing TAVP's work as a community organization, students in the class had opportunities to translate postcustodial skills and principles across our interdisciplinary course content. Although digital skills are increasingly valued as an outcome of higher education, our collaboration with the TAVP enabled students not only to build digital literacy, but also to gain insight into the craft—that is, the intellectually skilled art—involved in digital oral history stewardship and in archival stewardship at large.[43] Of course, our class was involved in only a small part of the work required to make digital oral history collections publicly available and searchable. We did not participate, for example, in preservation planning, the development of file-naming conventions, or server-side management of GLIFOS. Nevertheless, in a modest capacity, archival labor was rendered visible to the rising generation of thinkers in our class. Additionally, the collaboration formed a bridge between critical theory and practice that suggests an important role for oral history stewardship in theoretically informed humanities study. If, as archives theorist Joel Wurl proposes, an archived community is an enfranchised community, student collaborators with the TAVP recognized a causal relationship between oral history documentation and the conditions of social equality.[44]

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[43] Think pieces on this topic proliferate. For an especially useful example, see William Pannapacker, "No More Digitally Challenged Liberal-Arts Majors," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 18, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/No-More-Digitally-Challenged/143079/.

[44] Wurl writes, "Could it be, ultimately, that solutions to a more harmonious and equitable social condition lie, in part, in developing and strengthening documentation of minority cultures? The answer . . . is a resounding yes, as long as the work is done in ways that ensure the full and free engagement of the documented"; Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 73.