An Individual Approach: A Case Study on Oral History Accessioning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the convergence of traditional accessioning practices in the archives and best practices for describing and growing access to oral history. Archives traditionally focus on collective description of records, describing materials as aggregates at the collection, series, or folder levels versus item-level description. Describing materials based on their fonds or provenance preserves contextual information about their creation, and approaching description in an aggregate way further helps archivists provide more efficient access to both small and large bodies of records. However, when applied to oral history collections, the collective description approach underserves the essential and individual characteristics of oral history materials. If oral history focuses on individual experience and each oral history is governed by its own release or rights agreement, what are the implications for archival accessioning? How might archives adapt broader archival practice to focus accessioning on the individual level when it comes to oral histories? Offering a case study of oral history accessioning procedures in Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Maryland, this article looks to fill gaps in archival practice and to offer a methodology for the accessioning of oral history in a way that is both ethical and seeks to enhance access and discoverability.

Once relegated to the margins within archival repositories, oral history as a form of historical record has become increasingly prevalent—more collected and created since the latter half of the twentieth century.[1] It has also been more broadly recognized and prioritized in archival repositories and made more visible through cataloging, digitization, preservation, and related outreach efforts.[2] The value of oral history is widely acknowledged as a means of enhancing the documentary record and giving voice to the marginalized and underrepresented.[3] While the archival literature shows little to no question of the value of oral history,[4] and while further scholarship urges the archivist's role as archivist-activist, the literature remains far more sparse when it comes to the intersections of archival practice and the archiving of oral history. This was lamented in a 2016 article in *American Archivist,* with author Jessica Wagner Webster stating that "there seems to be a dearth of case studies in the archival literature containing practical information on method."[5] Almost ten years later, this assessment remains relevant.

This is particularly true when it comes to accessioning, the foundational practice that serves as the basis of archival stewardship. In 2021, Weatherly A. Stephan[6] contributed to the archival literature with a case study proposing a descriptive approach for processing a large and complex oral history collection. Stephan's article addresses both inclusivity and efficiency in archival description of oral histories, adding significantly to the archival literature on the intersection between oral history and archival practice. A gap still remains within the archival literature on the descriptive approaches to oral history and accessioning.

Within the oral history community, archival accessioning is not necessarily accounted for in the practice of "doing oral history," especially if the oral history project is not slated for archival preservation at the time of inception. Michael Frisch and Douglas Lambert discuss the "paradox of method in oral history" in Donald Richie's second edition of *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History.* They state that ". . . most training programs, workshops, manuals, and methodological guides on oral history focus predominantly and in some cases exclusively on interviewing . . ."[7] This finding was supported when we searched for oral history articles across the archival literature. We found that the vast majority of search results[8] fall into the following categories and do not address oral history description or accessioning practices: book reviews, guides to repository holdings, the role of oral history, documentation strategy, benefits to researchers, benefits to archival programs or collections, preservation, oral history project websites, defining oral history materials, or legal issues.

Taking an even closer look for articles using the key word terms "oral history" and "accession" or "accessioning," a search of the publication *Archival Issues*, for example, results in the retrieval of only a single article from 2023.[9] A keyword search of *American Archivist* similarly brings up scant results, with two articles from the 1970s and one from 2016. The single references to "accessions" or "accessioning" in

these articles are made in passing and do not speak to or otherwise interrogate the practice of oral history accessioning.[10] The oral history literature, meanwhile, reveals somewhat more on this intersection, with a greater number of related search results, thirteen total, in a keyword search of the term "accession" across the journal *Oral History Review.* Of these articles, the most robust (yet still very brief) reference to oral history accessioning comes from Leslie McCartney. In an exploration of best practices at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program, McCartney briefly states that "we would need to accession the recordings into our oral history collection and assign a unique oral history accession number."[11] The methodology of doing so, however, is not explained. *Archival Accessioning*, a publication edited by Audra Eagle Yun, provides archivists with guidance for accessioning a wide variety of materials, with distinct chapters on the accessioning of manuscripts and personal papers, audiovisual and digital archives, among other formats. Oral history, however, is only mentioned as a potential technique that archivists might use to capture donors' memories and contextual knowledge prior to accessioning.[12] Speaking to the broader status of archival accessioning, Yun says that "Professional networks and a lack of national guidance on accessioning contribute to a sense of mystery and exclusivity in the acquisition and custodial enterprises."[13] This certainly applies when it comes to oral history accessioning. The inference is backed in an oral history guide that states that "Libraries, archives, museums, and other institutions chosen to house local oral history collections will find little help in standard reference works when the[y] begin the vital steps of accessioning and cataloging oral memoirs."[14]

Additionally, Douglas Boyd and Sara Abdmishani Price offer a useful technical discussion of born-digital workflows, but do not provide context of theory and practice at repositories with a broader collecting scope beyond oral history.[15] Frisch and Lambert also note, "Organizing, describing, and referencing interviews are all seen as important, but these are conventionally imagined as something really 'done,' in terms of methodology, by librarians and archivists."[16] We also consulted articles about sound and audiovisual archives[17] and found many articles about cataloging practices in the 1970s through the 1990s, but few in recent years, and these articles do not provide guidance from an archival description standpoint.

The oral history literature has more robust and recent work around metadata characteristics and best practices by scholars.[18] The Oral History Association (OHA)'s Metadata Task Force has made very significant contributions to this area. In 2020, the task force published its "Oral History Metadata Description: A Survey of Practices" report[19] and offers oral historians, archivists, and others a "Metadata Assessment and Planning Tool"[20] that provides practical guidance to approaching metadata. Of note, the 2020 report reveals two accessioning-related quotes from respondents, one indicating that "All of our oral history program interviews are cataloged at the item level (so each one has a publicly available catalog record as soon as it is accessioned). . . ." Another respondent explains that ". . . we need to

provide more accurate and comprehensive description at the point of accession, which means more details needed from our interviewers, project partners and donors." Again, as with our other findings in examining the archival and oral history literature for accessioning-related terms, methodological approaches to this accessioning work are not explained.

Overall, there is a need to recognize the roles of oral historians, librarians, and archivists in this conversation and understand who is doing what, and what steps could be missing or enhanced. The different interpretations of terminologies for cataloging, indexing, processing, and accessioning—and the subsequent practices that result—also add complex layers to the fundamental question of how to make oral history interviews more visible and accessible.

The simple and traditional definition of accessioning, to take "intellectual and physical custody of materials, often under legal or policy authority,"[21] belies a much more complicated reality of archival work. It involves ethical and procedural concerns for archival materials of all kinds, as well as a multitude of activities under the "accessioning" banner. But oral history, and the inherent nature of oral history as a cocreated product, evokes yet further, and unique, considerations around ethical practice and process.

The majority of visible oral history interview collections are accessible through traditional cataloging at the item level. This results in increased access points and improved search for what is probably only a small selection of oral history materials across repositories, and it is difficult to measure how many other oral history interviews or collections exist but are not accessible to the public. Is it better to have less material accessible with full description, or more material accessible with minimal description? Should archivists continue providing access via library catalog records, or should archives create individual descriptions in accession records and finding aids where there is space for collective description and contextualization? What would be some of the implications of these actions and decisions on institutional resource allocation? Each repository will have its own approach as it weighs the pros and cons of its available resources and existing systems.

In a field in which *respect des fonds*, or grouping collections of records according to their origin, is a foundational principle, archivists typically gain initial intellectual and physical control of discrete groupings of materials. This approach is also known as "collective description" in which archivists describe "related items as a unified whole in a single record."[22] Archivists create accession records describing the physical or born-digital extents of materials created or collected and then acquired by an organization. But how do archivists approach, or how should they approach, the accessioning of oral history when each individual interview is a cocreated product by the narrator[23] and interviewer? In many cases each oral history is governed by its own rights agreement between creators/donors and repositories as reflected in individual deeds of gift or release forms. How do archives handle the accessioning

of oral history when each interview is both a standalone gift offer to the archives and also a component of a larger group?

The case study here delineates an item-based approach to oral history accessioning as a means of recognizing and reflecting the unique rights statuses and desires that oral history narrators may have around use of their oral histories, as well as for building a foundation for improved description at later points of oral history processing. While the process requires upfront capacity around information gathering and time in conducting accessioning, it ultimately provides a framework for using efficient archival practices, for enhancing discoverability, and for prioritizing ethical concerns.

Precedents do exist for an item-based approach to oral history accessioning, as is alluded to in at least one response in the "Oral History Metadata Description: A Survey of Practices" report[24] referenced earlier. More recently, in a 2024 webinar focused on oral histories and digital preservation, an item-level approach to oral history accessioning was also briefly referenced in the oral history processing workflows at the Virginia university William and Mary.[25] Anecdotally, we have found this item-level approach to be more common in some oral history centers, repositories such as Louisiana State University's T. Harry Williams Center and the University of Kentucky's Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, among others, dedicated specifically to oral history work, from planning and conducting oral history interviews to preserving and making them accessible. Having staff dedicated to oral history is a common denominator among these centers, yet the work at William and Mary and the work in this article's case study indicate that the approach may be applied in archives with broader collecting scopes beyond oral history. The methodology described in this article seeks to illuminate a possible approach.

It is important to note that the authors of this case study do not view the practices described here as a codification of methodology for oral history accessioning, but rather as a call to reassess current archival practices for oral histories and the ways in which these practices converge with the unique considerations around working with those materials. The practices described here are intended to be adaptable and scalable across archival settings and local contexts and capacities as is recommended in the recently released Archival Accessioning Best Practices.[26] Overall, the authors observed gaps in the literature and would advocate for further research and case studies from repositories of varying sizes, along with further examinations of methodological approaches.

Background

For many years at the University of Maryland (UMD), as with a multitude of archives, full finding aids were the traditional goal for serving archival materials. The norm of processing all collections to an "ideal standard level"[27] had contributed

to the broader archival dilemma by the early 2000s of large swaths of unprocessed materials.[28] With backlogs growing, UMD moved toward practicing the concept of "minimal processing" and "accessioning as processing" to make new and important archival collections accessible to researchers in a more efficient manner. However, in both approaches, UMD had limited success in providing access to oral histories[29] with legacy and existing accessioning and processing guidelines. This is indicated in at least two editions of the departmental processing manual for which audiovisual formats are addressed without full guidance for the level of description in accession records and finding aids. This often left the means of accessioning audiovisual materials up to archivist interpretation on a case-by-case basis, which resulted in incomplete or inconsistent accession records across collections and over time.

Existing administrative, accession, and finding aid records indicate that audiovisual materials were physically separated from other materials with which they were originally donated. This was, and still is, a common practice among archives. Documentation of the separated materials varies by accession and collection. Sometimes it is very clear to navigate, but for the most part, the documentation is not available or easy to find in the administrative files. This resulted in a number of seemingly lost audiovisual items, including oral histories.

For example, with 1,077 archival collection finding aids available to the public in our staff locations register, only ten oral history groupings are indicated as specific titles of an oral history project (i.e., Leonard Rapport oral histories), as generic titles of a group of recordings (i.e., Oral History Project Tapes), or as a processed series title (i.e., Oral Histories). An ArchivesSpace export of total accessions holdings was searched with the truncated search term "oral histor" to simplify the term and yield results with multiple endings such as "oral histories" and "oral history." The "Title" field showed twenty results, and the "Content Description" field gave sixty results. When the accession records for the case study that follows are included, as well as additional collections piloting this approach at UMD, there are a total of 154 accessions with "oral histor" in the Content Description.

Without a set of guidelines for accessioning audiovisual materials, archivists described materials at a variety of levels of description and documentation. Oral history collections were also mixed into this setting of incomplete guidance and thus have not been made available to researchers in a consistent way despite donor, creator, and archivist interests in enhancing the historical record with oral history projects. With the archival profession's adoption of community archiving, reparative archiving, and newer emphasis on documentation of underrepresented communities, oral histories have a new life in archives that will only be effective if they can be accessible to intended user communities and/or the public. The guidelines and workflows resulting from the case study will help us plan a strategy and define resources needed to improve documentation and description for both legacy and new oral history collections going forward.

In a world that expects immediate access to multimedia online, there is high interest in publishing oral histories in our library's digital collections or digitizing legacy analog recordings quickly. Doug Boyd agrees that "Archival finding aids have traditionally been important tools for discovery and detailed description of archival materials. Yet the 'digital revolution' has dramatically altered users' expectations regarding what the Internet can provide. . . . Typically, users want access to digital surrogates of the interview itself."[30] While this is a valid and worthy goal, this approach and expectation tips the balance toward emphasizing digital object metadata over core description of materials in accession records first. The item-level nature of audiovisual materials also lends to this predicament outside of archival best practices where a few born-digital recordings could easily be uploaded and described in a digital collections platform very quickly. Of course this is possible, but is it best practice?

Accessioning Procedures for Oral History

The knowledge and awareness of our oral history collections' needs for better public access prompted the drafting of new oral history accessioning and processing procedures to include in our department's processing manual. In devising procedures for accessioning and processing oral history materials, we decided to describe them in all administrative records at the item level, including accession records. In the past a group of many oral histories would have received one single accession number. So, assigning a different accession number to each individual oral history was a new approach for us, indeed.[31] It was a challenge to integrate this practice into existing guidelines while maintaining broader departmental aims of consistency and interoperability in our accession record structure.[32]

Yet, we felt this decision was needed for several reasons. First, release forms were not consistently used in our archives, which resulted in a lack of rights information and thus limited public access. In some cases, the recordings had release forms that did not cover all necessary components, or narrators released rights to a different organization or institution, causing further confusion as to the correct rights holder. Additionally, access permissions to each oral history can be different even if the oral histories are part of the same collection or project, and documenting this accurately requires each participant to sign a release form. Our new guidelines also formalize and clearly outline steps to accessioning and processing oral histories in advance of creating individual digital collection records. Metadata about each interview is captured earlier and, ideally, by the creator-donor, and can be used for all points of access. This process is described in the "Oral History Inventory Template" section that follows. By prioritizing the creation and documentation of metadata components early on, the individual records are more accurate and complete starting with the first step of accessioning. A challenge in processing legacy oral histories is

that archivists are often far-removed from the creation and development of the oral history. They describe materials in hindsight, summarizing and doing their best to capture key biographical points about narrators and/or key topics of discussion after listening to their respective oral histories recordings or after reading or skimming created transcripts. Working directly and early on with creators-donors, however, offers an opportunity for those involved in the creation of the oral history to actively participate in the description process, capturing what narrators and/or interviewers might want readers and listeners to know about themselves and their oral history. The metadata created and documented is also available for inclusive and expanded description in the finding aid and in digital collections. Finally, individual records and descriptions contribute to closing the gap on underrepresented communities in the archival record.

The approach going forward is to create one accession record for each interview recording and then create one finding aid for a collection of interview recordings. We looked at several other archival institutions that also use ArchivesSpace to find examples, and then we selected the descriptive methods that worked best for our archives' local practices. Initially, we also looked at institutions using other content management systems; however, doing so muddied the waters of our decision-making, and we thus focused on institutions using ArchivesSpace. These new procedures were written into our department processing manual, which was being revised at the time, and address both incoming recordings and legacy recordings that may have limited documentation. The following are guidelines we incorporated specifically for oral histories being described in ArchivesSpace. Institutions using a different content management system can adapt these recommendations to their system. All other description notes at our institution follow the standard guidelines in our processing manual.

The accession title is comprised of the oral history collection name, a DACS-compliant indication of the nature of the records (i.e., this may most often be "recordings"), and the narrator's name in the following format:

> [Oral History Collection Name + nature of records: Narrator's First Name, Narrator's Last Name].
> An interview from our Joseph "Tex" Gathings oral history recordings, for example, has the accession title:
> "Joseph "Tex" Gathings oral history recordings: James Featherstone.

Each interview should receive a separate accession number. When there are multiple recordings and dates for one person, all recorded parts will have one accession number.

In terms of accession dates, we found that there are frequently multiple dates associated with one interview, and there may or may not be a signed release form to serve as a source for the date information. We determined the following: the

primary date of accession is the date of the narrator's signature. Where release forms are not available and/or in the cases where the forms do not document original transfer or stewardship by UMD, we plan to use the date of the deed of gift as the accession date. Where no release form or deed of gift is available, the archives will make an informed decision following local practice. Although the new guidelines strive to remove subjective decisions, flexibility is still necessary.

The accession's content description should follow best practices for description of the accession, as well as name the narrator and interviewer, identify the project/collection that it is part of, provide some context about the project/collection, and list the materials and formats included in the accession. If there was more than one interviewer, and/or more than one narrator, all names and roles should be included in this content description.

Since more and more oral history accessions will be comprised of born-digital formats in addition to traditional analog media created using digital audio or video recording equipment or online platforms, a disposition note can be used to include any information about the born-digital inventorying or processing, if applicable.

An inventory for the oral histories can be referred to in the inventory note. We created a modified inventory for capturing oral history metadata, and it may be a combined inventory for multiple interviews in an oral history project.

Information about any restrictions noted by the interviewee/narrator in the release form, in addition to other standard notes regarding access, can be included in an Access Restrictions note. For example, "Oral history interview closed by narrator request until 2050," or, "Narrator requests anonymity for their interview, including no public access to their oral history recording and indicating their speaking parts within the transcription as 'Anonymous' versus by their name."

Information about copyrights and use of materials as indicated in the release form can be included in a Use Restrictions note. For example, "To the extent that they own copyright, the creator(s)/donor(s) have retained copyright and licensed their materials to be freely used for noncommercial purposes, so long as attribution is provided. This agreement is governed by a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Deed (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported) license. Researchers do not need further permission to move forward with noncommercial use. In cases not covered by the Creative Commons license, it is the researcher's responsibility to secure permission to publish materials from the appropriate copyright holder." A corresponding example for the collection's finding aid is "Materials in this collection have varying copyright statuses and/or Creative Commons licenses applied to them; please see the Conditions Governing Use note at the series, file, or item level for specific rights and usage information. It is the researcher's responsibility to secure permission to publish materials from the appropriate copyright holder."

Capturing the extents for oral history materials originally recorded onto analog media, such as audio cassette tapes or VHS tapes, is a fairly familiar and straightforward step most archives will have addressed in their guidelines. Extents for oral histories in a born-digital format was a point of challenge for us because we were only able to view public finding aid records in our cursory review of other archives' practices. We decided to use the "Number," or quantity, field to record the number of unique items. For example, "3" would be used for an oral history accession comprised of a video recording, an audio recording, and a transcript. The "Type" field for oral history materials would be "items." In addition, the physical description can be used to record the analog or digital format, such as audio cassette tape, VHS tape, MP4 video recording, WAV audio recording, or PDF transcript.

Agent records in ArchivesSpace record the source, creator, and/or donor of the accession such as the name of the organization or person(s). For oral history accessions, an agent record should be created for both of the creators, one for the interviewer and one for the narrator.

For the Resource Record, or finding aid, our oral history guidelines remained more similar to the general processing guidelines. Once all or most of the oral histories from a project or donation are accessioned, they are combined into one collection. In our cursory search of oral history finding aids from ten other institutions using ArchivesSpace, and a total of twenty-four collection finding aids reviewed, we observed that the majority of them created separate records for each person in alphabetical order. This suited our needs. While this case study does not focus on finding aid creation, an important takeaway is that the initial inventorying and metadata creation processes served as the basis of description for the finding aid.

Oral History Inventory Template

The work of OHA's Metadata Task Force inspired our development of our inventory template noted earlier, one that could be used over the life cycle of an oral history project, informing and enhancing our accessioning work and records, as well as the work in later stages of processing, metadata creation, and online access to individual oral history records in our digital collections repository. The inventory template is a spreadsheet comprised of multiple tabs, each representing different components of information about the oral history interview, about the interviewers and narrators who served as co-creators, and providing broader context about the oral history project of which the interviews are a part and connected to each other.

Oral history processing is well known as being time intensive, contributing in part to backlogs of oral history materials across archival repositories. From transcription and auditing to integrating narrator edits, formatting for house style, preparing finding aid content, and preparing individual records to facilitate access to oral history recordings and transcripts, a multitude of actions may (depending

on repository practice) be involved in moving oral histories from their initial creation and accessioning through to public access. In accepting that significant time and resources must be devoted to the different components and activities of oral history processing, how might archivists play a role from the very beginning of project planning—when possible to do so in collaboration with project creators or donors—in shaping processing activities for the facilitation of access? One way to do so is to consider and plan for the creation of "metadata" as part of the early stages of project planning and interviewing. In this context, "metadata" is viewed broadly as information about the various components of the project, not solely as information about the project's digital files.

Introductory oral history trainings offered by regional and national organizations[33] often cover the full oral history life cycle to not only teach key skills related to conducting interviews, but to encourage participants to consider and prepare for later steps around preservation and growing access to interviews. With community members and oral historians taking part in collecting metadata about their interviews, it can help to alleviate growing backlogs of oral histories in archives with little to no description and to facilitate access in a more timely fashion. As referenced by Weatherly A. Stephan in her article on inclusive and efficient archival description of oral histories, the Oral History Association, in its "Statement on Ethics," connects the concepts of ethical stewardship with the processes of describing and making oral history accessible. Stephan explains in particular that OHA "notes the need to 'respect the personhood' of the narrator when making decisions concerning description, metadata, and access."[34]

Along this line, another influential framework underlying our approach to description for this project was Jessica Tai's "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description." Tai explains that a framework of cultural humility sets the stage for "the development of an ethical descriptive practice as one that is iterative and cyclical, not linear and not with a finite date of achievement."[35] For us, this means, in part, continuing assessment in our processes and efforts toward inclusive description of oral history collections. While we have laid out the following process for documenting metadata, this is just one possible approach that may evolve over time.

Within our metadata template, the first tab is titled "Basic Metadata" and documents key metadata components useful for the creation of the project's accession records. These include first and last names of the narrator and interviewer, project title, interview title, interview date, lengths of the transcript (in pages) and recording (in hours, minutes, and seconds); interview file formats, language, existence of a signed release form, date of signed release form, and an abstract. This basic information is gathered and created by the project team involved in interviewing and early processing and is intended for specific use in our accessioning and later processing work. The information we ask for here is also intended

to be broadly useful and interoperable so that if an oral history collection is later transferred to another repository, the information provided within the metadata spreadsheet would facilitate an understanding of the key components of each of the oral histories as well as help to facilitate further processing and access to the oral histories.

Four additional tabs within our metadata spreadsheet contribute to broader documentation around the history and context of the selection of narrators, the interviewer, the context within which each interview has taken place, and further background information about the overarching oral history project itself. These tabs are primarily meant for internal staff use, but the information gathered within may be useful as archivists further prepare the collection's finding aid. A final tab in our metadata spreadsheet is specific to our repository and prescribes the entering of metadata in preparation for online access to oral history recordings and transcripts in our digital collections repository. The information on the tab is pulled primarily from our "Basic Metadata" tab but also includes additional required fields that correspond to our libraries' broader metadata guidelines for audiovisual materials.

As mentioned earlier, this inventory plays a role in the accessioning process, and it does so in two ways. The metadata on individual oral histories is used in the process of creating a project's individual accession records. Importantly, however, the inventory also ties a project's disparate interviews together. Within each oral history accession record, the file path for the collective project inventory is linked in the inventory note field.

Archival Labor

Depending on the resources available for an archives, this work can be scaled up or down. Factors may include staffing, time, budget, backlog, and other priorities. Our institution prioritized this work in 2023–2024, and we carved out time for students, staff, and faculty to contribute to this case study with some of the stages occurring simultaneously. Going forward, we plan to continue the work by adjusting workflows and training new students and staff on certain stages, while others already participating will continue their tasks.

As of 2025, the archives staff in Special Collections and University Archives at UMD was made up of ten faculty, eight staff, seventeen student assistants/graduate assistants, and three contractor/part-time positions. The total number of personnel approximately represents our staff over the years. More than a decade ago, accessioning work was done by individuals in many of these positions, contributing to some level of inconsistency in recordkeeping. In roughly the last ten years, a new team, the "Access Team," was created as a functional area primarily responsible for accessioning and processing in our archives. Team members not only accessioned

and processed collections across the archives' six different "collecting areas," but were also responsible for training and quality control. As we discuss further in our case study, staff working on oral history accessioning for the project do this while also balancing other archival activities for which they are responsible, resulting in their attention being divided. A growing volume of new oral history projects has brought to the archives the great benefit of a much broader array of experiences and histories documented within the archives' holdings. Yet, increased volume also brings considerations of archival capacity. Again, it comes down to setting priorities and balancing existing workloads with the benefits of growing access to oral history collections and providing related training and experience to more staff.

On average, our archives typically accessioned between ten and twenty oral histories a year with traditional collective description practices. But, in the last few years, an archives-initiated oral history project and forthcoming oral history projects on the horizon will have us accessioning around fifty oral history interviews a year. The individual approach is currently manageable given these numbers and our staffing, but as volume increases, we will have to carefully consider our capacity and resource allocation. The work done in oral history centers offers an interesting comparison for consideration. As described by Doug Boyd, the Nunn Center, whose work is centered on oral history, accessions between 300 to 400 oral histories a year.[36] This larger scale is possible with staff dedicated to oral history work.

For archives of varying sizes, designating phases of work is one way to organize and scale up or down. The decision to steward an oral history project should be primarily paired with securing the deed of gift and/or the release forms conveying either rights to the archives or permissions to make the oral histories accessible. Secondarily, precustodial collaboration between cocreators and archivists around the early creation of metadata may be phased into early project planning stages. The labor of cocreators who contribute to this effort should not be underemphasized. As mentioned earlier, there is a significant benefit in project participants contributing to the way their oral histories are described. They might do so through information they provide in biographical forms prior to an interview, or with biographical descriptions or abstracts written directly by project interviewers. Project interviewers have worked directly with narrators and are well familiar with the content of the interviews. It is also important to recognize that accessioning, processing, and creating a finding aid and putting digital content online can each be separate phases completed at different times as resources allow, but will be possible to do accurately and appropriately because the administrative paperwork is completed and available. We are working on implementing our new guidelines in a sustainable way, and each year may yield more or less capacity according to our available resources.

Case Study: Reparative Histories: The Black Experience

A new oral history project at UMD, Reparative Histories: The Black Experience, offered the opportunity to put theory into practice. Established in 2020 by the then-University Archivist Lae'l Hughes-Watkins[37] (later UMD Libraries' associate director for engagement, inclusion, and reparative archiving), Reparative Histories seeks to address the relative absence of the histories of traditionally marginalized communities within UMD's University Archives's collections. The Black Experience Project focuses on documenting the existence and experience of Black students, staff, and faculty at UMD, as well as members of nearby communities, through the voices and stories of the participants themselves. Intended as an ongoing project, the Black Experience collection numbered fifty-nine interviews as of 2024. The intent has been to grow the program under the broader Reparative Histories umbrella to also include oral history interviews with Latinx and Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) students, alumni, staff, and faculty as well as UMD community members from other marginalized groups.

The ongoing nature of this project, and the need to manage and preserve many moving pieces, required documented and shared procedures around the accessioning of the materials. Hughes-Watkins and the project's primary interviewer, Dr. Francena Turner, provided our team of archivists with access to a shared Google Drive with a project metadata spreadsheet and further links to the release form, transcript, and audio files for each oral history interview. The process and scope of documenting project metadata shifted after early consideration and discussion. The project team and archivists discussed the benefits of creating narrator biographies and abstracts early on, soon after the creation of interviews, as well as the challenges and limitations of description created by archivists in later stages of processing. A decision was made that the project interviewer would complete the biographies and abstracts for each interview.

While the project metadata spreadsheet is actively used by the project team and documents the status of in-progress transcript work and completed transcripts, our archiving team has focused our accessioning work particularly on those oral history interviews with completed transcripts and considered ready for public access. Accessioning to date for the oral histories in this collection was conducted by two full-time staff members, with accessioning review undertaken by a third full-time staff member. All three of these archivists work on accessioning-related tasks in varying ways while also juggling other archival responsibilities. The archivist charged with accessioning review for this project manages the department's overall accessioning program. Responsibility for accessioning is 50 percent of another one of the archivists' roles. The third archivist conducts broader strategizing and management around all of our special collections–related work, including accessioning. It is also important to single out the significant work that the project interviewer contributed

in creating narrator biographies and descriptive abstracts for each interview, beyond the time-intensive labor of preparing for and facilitating the interviews. Oral historian Donald Ritchie advises counting on "doing as many as ten hours of research for every hour of interview conducted."[38] The amount of research and preparation, not to mention the time in each interview, provides the interviewer with an intimate understanding of those aspects of the narrator's history and experience that might be highlighted within the descriptions created. For this project, the project interviewer and their work has played a critical role in improved description and recognition of the lives of contributing narrators, as described further below.

Using our new procedures for accessioning oral history, we created an individual accession record in ArchivesSpace for each oral history interview. Taking advantage of ArchivesSpace's "spawn" functionality, which allows the copying of one record for further editing and saving as a new record, we are able to efficiently create new accession records for individual oral histories while editing and capturing each interview's particular provenance and, when applicable, differing rights statuses. Melding our repository's broader archival accessioning practice of creating and maintaining preliminary inventory documents for each of our accessions, we link within each accession record a growing preliminary inventory that includes a line of metadata for each processed oral history interview ("processed" meaning that the interview has both a recording and a completed transcript ready for public access). This practice keeps an eye to as much standardization and alignment as possible with our broader accessioning practices while also hitting the heart of our original need: capturing and reflecting both the individual nature of each oral history interview, while associating and connecting the interview back to the broader project and to other completed interviews.

The use of an individual approach results in increased discoverability of oral histories to user communities through multiple access points in the public finding aid, as well as a greater recognition of narrators' humanity, that they are more than a first and last name, as is so often represented in many oral history finding aids. A comparison between the Black Experience collection and a legacy finding aid, the broadly named "Oral History collection" as mentioned earlier, reveals that the Black Experience collection has much higher discoverability of individual interviews. Information about narrators—biographical information and topics discussed in their interviews—are represented in the finding aid and offer multiple access points for keyword searching. This discoverability contributes to the oral historian's ethical goal of "respect[ing] the personhood" of oral history narrators.[39] It also helps to fulfill the vision and mission of the oral history project, demonstrating the existence and vitality of the Black community at UMD, past and present.

Looking at our legacy comparison collection, the collection title of "Oral History collection" does not give any indication of what the oral histories are about or if they were part of a project or not. While names of narrators are listed in the

Scope and Content note, no specific information is given about the narrators, topics covered, or rights. The date of the interview, recording format, and length of interview are available in an attached spreadsheet, which is a standard method we use for minimal processing. The broader "Oral History collection" originated from three different accessions. Two of the accessions were assigned an accession number using the generic accession date of January 1, 1856, which is an internal legacy indication that there is no documentation available for the materials. So, while this collection is not as hidden as others, the nonindividual collection description still limits potential use and discoverability as well as devalues the narrator as an individual.

Conclusion

As seen in the case study described here, too much information is lost when oral histories are treated at the collection level for minimal processing. Repositories, including our own, have made oral histories "accessible" via basic finding aids that provide minimal information about oral history extents. To make these interviews known, versus "hiding" them as unprocessed, is a milestone. But as seen via the finding aid of our "Oral History collection," the "who" of the participants, the context behind their selection and participation in the project, is lost as they are reduced primarily to their first and last names. As archivists working with oral history, this does not have to be the case. In our case study, dialogue between archivists and the project creators resulted in the creation of fuller description about narrators and the context of their interviews, as well as improved administrative documentation.

Archival labor for accessioning begins with precustodial work, including collaborating and communicating with oral historians before accessioning in the archives. The individual approach to oral history accessioning requires resources—staff time and capacity—for oral histories to be properly documented and given as much public access as possible, depending on the project goals and permissions. Having an oral history project, whether a current initiative or a legacy project, is a commitment of time for all involved and requires the resources and guidelines to make it available rather than hidden from view due to missing release forms or long restrictions. Archives with oral history holdings can use this case study as a model, incorporating what works for their capacity and available resources in different phases. Where our examination of the archival literature indicated a lack of documented methodology about the practice of oral history accessioning, the case study and accessioning procedures here seek to begin to fill a gap. How each phase is implemented will look different at every archives and possibly could borrow workflow models from the library cataloging community where oral history interviews have been cataloged for access in the past.

Accessioning is a building block, one critical to the traditional definition of establishing legal and physical control of materials within the archives, but more expansively—and when it comes to oral history—one whose practices can also set the stage for ethical handling of collections and inclusive description to improve discoverability and create a path for efficient processing and access.

Notes

1   Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps'": Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in 'The American Archivist', 1938–2011," *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26356662. In her article, Wagner Webster notes it was at this time, in particular, that scholars turned toward studying women, people of color, the working class, and other groups whose experiences had previously been underdocumented.

2   Linda Shopes, "After the Interview Ends: Moving Oral History Out of the Archives and into Publication," *The Oral History Review* 42, no. 2 (2015): 300–10, doi:10.1093/ohr/ohv037. On outreach, Linda Shopes expresses being "humbled by the multiple ways oral historians are currently putting oral history to work in the world—in radio productions, performances, digital storytelling, and artists' residencies. . . ." to name only a few examples of oral history's reach expanding beyond the archives.

3   Wagner Webster, "Filling the Gaps," 255.

4   Wagner Webster, "Filling the Gaps," 270. In a survey disseminated to a Society of American Archivists listserv and completed by 150 respondents, Wagner Webster found that 98 percent said they felt oral histories are a valuable addition to archival collections.

5   Wagner Webster, "Filling the Gaps," 259.

6   Weatherly A. Stephan, "The Platinum Rule Meets the Golden Minimum: Inclusive and Efficient Archival Description of Oral Histories," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8, article 11 (2021): 10–16, https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/11.

7   Michael Frisch and Douglas Lambert, "Case Study: Between the Raw and the Cooked in Oral History: Notes from the Kitchen," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford University Press, 2012), 334.

8   We examined archival journals such as *Archival Issues, American Archivist, Journal of Contemporary Studies,* and *Provenance.*

9   Annie Tummino and Victoria Fernandez, "Amplifying Civil Rights Collections with Oral Histories: A Collaboration with Alumni at Queens College, City University of New York," *Archival Issues* 42, no. 1 (2023): 7–28.

10 Ronald Filippelli, Oral History and the Archives, *American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (1976): 479–83, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.39.4.u3kw876j8127wl55; Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists, "Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask," *American Archivist* 36, no. 3 (1973): 361–65, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.36.3.244u5541t8h2066q; and Webster, "Filling the Gaps."

11 Leslie McCartney. "The Evolution of Best Practice at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program," *The Oral History Review* 50, no. 2 (2023): 193–205, 10.1080/00940798.2023.2236174.

12 Audra Eagle Yun, "Establishing an Accessioning Program," in *Archival Accessioning,* ed. Audra Eagle Yun (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021), 37.

13 Yun, Introduction, in *Archival Accessioning,* 3.

14 Thomas L. Charlton, "Oral History for Texans" (1985), Texas Historical Commission.

15 Douglas A. Boyd and Sara Abdmishani Price, "Case Study: Born Digital Accession Workflow: The Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries," Oral History in the Digital Age, Institute of Museum and Library Services, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/borndigital.

16 Frisch and Lambert, "Case Study: Between the Raw and the Cooked in Oral History," 334.

17 *Journal of the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives.*

18   Maria Vrachliotou and Christos Papatheodorou, "Interoperability of Oral History Metadata: An Ontological Model," *The Oral History Review* 51, no. 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2 024.2379367. This article is an example of a fully focused article on oral history metadata in the oral history literature.

19   "Oral History Metadata and Description: A Survey of Practices," Oral History Association Metadata Task Force, December 2020.

20   "Metadata Assessment and Planning Tool," Oral History Association, https://oralhistory.org/metadata-assessment-and-planning-tool, captured at https://perma.cc/3PLV-ZAW6.

21   SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology, s.v. "accession," https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/accession.html, captured at https://perma.cc/S89K-UCPX.

22   SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology, s.v. "collective description," https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/collective-description.html, captured at https://perma.cc/H4WX-YNTD.

23   Principles and Best Practices Glossary, Oral History Association, s.v. "narrator," https://oralhistory.org/narrator, captured at https://perma.cc/HM6P-LG9V. "Narrator" has become a preferred term in the oral history field over "interviewee" in recent years. As described in the Oral History Association (OHA)'s Principles and Best Practices Glossary, the use of the term "narrator" is "an acknowledgment that the people we interview have agency and are not merely "living human subjects."

24   "Oral History Metadata and Description: A Survey of Practices," Oral History Association Metadata Task Force, December 2020.

25   Michael Runyon, "Oral Histories and Digital Preservation" (webinar, World Digital Preservation Day, 2024).

26   National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group, "Archival Accessioning Best Practices," Society of American Archivists, 2024, https://accessioning.gitbook.io/archival-accessioning-best-practices, captured at https://perma.cc/23GN-XUM9.

27   Megan Desnoyers, "When Is a Collection Processed?," *Midwestern Archivist* 7 (1982): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41101552.

28   Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no 2 (2005): 208–63, https://www.doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863. In Greene and Meissner's "More Product, Less Process," the authors note that a 2003–2004 survey they conducted revealed that 60 percent of repositories at the time had at least a third of their collections unprocessed.

29   "Access" to oral histories has primarily been facilitated through the display of collection finding aids in our public "Finding Aid Database," the ArchivesSpace collection management system.

30   Douglas Boyd, "Achieving the Promise of Oral History in a Digital Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford University Press, 2012), 291.

31   As mentioned earlier, we have found examples of institutions with distinct "oral history centers," those centers dedicated specifically to conducting and growing access to oral history and taking an individual approach to oral history record creation.

32   In 2019, after a multiyear effort to prepare and migrate existing accession records and finding aids from a Microsoft Access database into ArchivesSpace, UMD Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives launched our ArchivesSpace public interface. The resource-intensive process to standardize a multitude of existing records in preparation for the migration created a newfound emphasis on standardization in ArchivesSpace record creation.

33   Examples include trainings from HumanitiesDC, the UC Berkeley Oral History Center, the Science History Institute, among many others.

34   Stephan, "The Platinum Rule Meets the Golden Minimum," 5.

35   Jessica Tai, "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.120.

36   Doug Boyd, "Informed Accessioning: Questions to Ask after the Interview," Oral History in the Digital Age.

37   Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 5 no. 6 (2018), https://elischolar.library.

yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/6. Hughes-Watkins' "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive" has offered an influential framework for UMD and other archives.

38 Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 75.

39 "OHA Statement on Ethics," Oral History Association, https://oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics, captured at https://perma.cc/6JF5-465M.

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