

Undocumented Organizing Collecting Initiative

Oral History Process & Ethical Guidelines

Centering Community Voices, Respecting Community Voices

The Undocumented Organizing Collecting Initiative aims to record and preserve memories of movement-building efforts from former and current undocumented organizers. As a community-based research practice, oral history carves spaces for a diverse set of organizers to represent themselves and reflect on the nuances of their lived experiences. This includes shedding light on the influences and creativity that informed their campaigns and inspired work that caught the attention of residents, news outlets, and elected officials throughout the nation.

The Undocumented Organizing Collecting Initiative has adopted and adhered to the following ethical guidelines, which bring together best practices from the Oral History Association and the work our colleagues carry forward at the National Museum of American History, to collect, preserve, and make accessible oral histories.

Preparation Process

Understanding that not all oral history projects or interviews are the same, the Collecting Initiative team strives to be informed of oral history theory, methodology, and ethics to guide our work. This research is a reflective and iterative process that takes place throughout the life of the project from the moment we establish contact with possible participants to the point when an oral history becomes public. Reflection is a fluid, important, and ongoing component of our work that molds to the project as it grows. This includes receiving training that embodies “Principles and Best Practices” set forth by the Oral History Association, maintaining communication with other oral history practitioners in museums and universities who work with historically harmed communities, and being open to acknowledging and changing potentially harmful approaches to our work.

Communication, Collaboration, and Transparency

We take seriously the role of “mutual responsibility” as interviewers and museum workers to “ensure that the narrator’s perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety are respected” (Oral History Association, 2018). To that end, the team builds relationships with potential oral history participants in a way that provides the interviewee control over the process and the content of the oral history. We co-create the audio interviews with a focus on the stories that

organizers themselves want to share. We strive for these oral histories to be a product of an ongoing relationship formed between the museum and community members and founded upon trust, communication, meaningful collaboration, and transparency.

Prior to recording interviews, the curator, project lead, and oral historian reach out to organizers who are open about their status in public settings and have played a role in movement-building efforts. We communicate the goal of creating a publicly accessible archive that documents movements led by undocumented individuals from their own perspective, and discuss the potential uses of oral history interviews in the future. We also take time to explain the oral history recording, transcription, and archiving process, and invite them to participate as narrators. Given the public nature of this project, we encourage organizers to take their time in making an informed decision about their participation.

Organizers who are interested in sharing their stories meet with the team's oral historian to discuss the scope of their interview, including identifying major topics they may want to unpack and setting boundaries to ensure a respectful dialogue. The oral historian works to mitigate any risk of rehashing traumatic events in organizers' lives, so it is especially important to have a mutual understanding of what should and should not be discussed during the recorded interview.

No oral histories are recorded or deposited in the archives unless organizers give consent. They are reminded of the limitations around privacy after interviews are recorded and are encouraged to review transcribed audio for potential edits or redactions before files are deposited in the archives. Finally, organizers are reminded that this is their space to tell their story—while the oral historian is there to guide their conversation with questions, they have the power to share their own story using their own words in whatever way they would like.

Archives Are Shaped by the Voices Who Fill Them

Several aspects of the archive are predefined by the Collecting Initiative, such as the geographical sites we are currently exploring, the limited number of oral histories we can record at the moment, and the type of specific audio equipment we are using to record interviews. However, the stories that are recorded are in part shaped by organizers who see the need to document particular life stories, events, and campaigns on a local, regional, and national scale. This allows for a project that, as it grows, is more reflective of the diversity of experiences and thought within the organizing spaces and movements led by undocumented individuals.

Preservation, Privacy, and Access

Preservation, privacy, and access are important components of oral history projects. The Undocumented Organizing Collecting Initiative collaborates with the Archives Center to create a sustainable platform for housing audio-format oral histories, transcriptions, and detailed index forms that help identify major events, dates, campaigns, and lived experiences shared by organizers. As we prepare oral histories and transcripts, the team strives to respect the personhood of organizers who contribute oral histories, as well as any desire for privacy they express during the recording, transcription, and preservation process. This includes reminding organizers that they can withdraw their oral histories from being deposited in the archive, close their interview to the public for a period of time, or redact certain parts of their transcripts.