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Meaning and Memory: Reconsidering the Appalachian Oral History Project

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Abstract

Initiated in the 1970's, the Appalachian Oral History Project (AOHP) contains thousands of oral histories collected from residents of the Central Appalachian region. A significant portion of these oral histories were conducted with Black residents of the region, thus serving as a repository of voices long unheard in the dominant historical narrative. Like many such collections, the audio cassettes were left to gather dust for decades. A project has recently begun to digitize and preserve all of the oral histories. What do the oral histories in the AOHP collection have to say to us today about both Black identity in Central Appalachia and the use of oral history to confront questions of place and identity? More importantly, how do contemporary Black residents in one of the same communities in which the oral histories were originally conducted wish to respond to the recorded interviews? Digital recordings were played for Black residents of the same community from which many of the original oral histories were collected in order to foster conversation and dialogue about the material. Using ethnographic methods, this research illustrates the ways new forms of archival work and historical scholarship provide a crucial opportunity to enhance what we know of place and identity and allows for stories to be reclaimed by the people and communities from which they came. Found within these intersections of theory, method, and discipline is space for information science research to push beyond traditional boundaries that wholly embrace the political and the fight for social justice.

Keywords: digital scholarship; oral history; research methods

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Introduction

Initially undertaken in the early 1970s, the Appalachian Oral History Project (AOHP) involved a partnership between scholars at four institutions of higher education to collect and archive oral histories from thousands of residents of the Appalachian region. With guidance from faculty, nearly all of the oral histories—around 3,000 of them—were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by students of Alice Lloyd College, Appalachian State University, Emory & Henry College, and Lees Junior College. The aim of the project was to create a social history of Central Appalachia as told by the people of the place (Shackelford & Weinberg, 1977). One central and specific goal was to gather oral histories from Black residents of the Appalachian region, and these constitute a significant portion of the collection. Thus, the lasting result of the AOHP is a trove of data related to an extraordinary range of subjects that are of interest to multiple fields and disciplines. More importantly, the collection is one that especially brings forward firsthand accounts of a community whose story is largely left untold in the scholarship of the region (Hayden, 2004; Smith, 2004). Those interviewed as part of the project told the stories of their

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lives, of wars they had served in, of the farms they had cultivated, and of the churches they had built and worshipped in. In voices both forceful and feeble, voices mixed with sadness and bemusement and utter seriousness, they told the stories of their enslaved grandparents, of the Depression, of segregation, of Jim Crow, and of the ordinary indignities they suffered daily.

The AOHP culminated in a book, *Our Appalachia*, published in 1977, which was described then as a powerful and revealing story of a particular American subculture as recounted by a neglected and often misrepresented people (Shackelford & Weinberg, 1977). At that time, the AOHP was part of a wave of oral history projects regarded as a highly innovative methodological form and one born out of technological progress (Lynd & Lynd, 2009). Affordable cassette tape recorders had by then become widely available, providing a convenient tool for collecting source material from non-elite voices missing from the dominant historical narrative (Dunaway & Baum, 1996; Lynd & Lynd, 1973). This development allowed for scholars across multiple disciplines to cast the widest possible net, recording large numbers of interviews with members of specific communities, which is reflected in the substantial number of oral histories collected as part of the AOHP (Ritchie, 2015). What distinguishes oral history from other qualitative research methods is that an interview can be recorded, transcribed, archived, and, most especially, made accessible and available for research and reinterpretation (Grele, 1993; Ritchie, 2015).

Key to the lasting import of oral history is the preservation of all related materials, and audio recordings on cassette tapes pose particular risks of deterioration and obsolescence (Moss & Mazikana, 1986; Paton, 1990). Nevertheless, in the decades following its initiation, little else was made of the AOHP beyond the resultant book. The AOHP materials were eventually relegated to a locked closet, rendered inaccessible, and nearly forgotten. According to Shopes (1981), despite the possibilities afforded by oral history as method to contribute to the scholarly conversation, many such collections are eventually disregarded or forgotten. Yet, just as cassette recorders left their mark on the work of oral history, new technologies are allowing us to reimagine the potential of such collections and offer a renewed sense of urgency regarding their preservation in digital formats (Ritchie, 2015). A wide array of tools now provides archivists and historians an opportunity to prevent loss of original materials while making it easier to increase public availability. Furthermore, emerging and ever-evolving forms of digital scholarship are reshaping our approaches to the exploration of historical and social issues (Ayers, 2013). Through a partnership between the campus library and faculty in the interdisciplinary department of Civic Innovation, Emory & Henry College has begun to digitize that institution's portion of the oral history materials so they can be made available and accessible online to the community, to scholars, and to the wider world.

This work raises several important questions. What do the oral histories in the AOHP collection have to say to us today about both Black identity in Central Appalachia and the use of oral history to confront questions of place and identity? More importantly, how do contemporary Black residents in one of the same communities in which the oral histories were originally conducted wish to respond to the recorded interviews? The research presented in this paper made use of ethnographic methods of observation, participant interaction, and interviews to explore these questions. Utilizing newly created digital files of the AOHP collection, the research was designed to be a conversation across time between current residents of the region and those who long ago told their own stories of what it meant to live as a Black American in Central Appalachia. Such a method offers a model for similar and more expansive projects. Furthermore, the research provides a framework for a reconsideration of oral history as practice from a critical perspective while utilizing tools of digital scholarship.

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Place-Based Identity and the Appalachian Oral History Project

The Appalachian Regional Commission (2020) long ago drew distinct political and economic boundaries of Appalachia. Nevertheless, in geographic and cultural terms, the region is not so easily defined (Batteau, 1991; Williams, 2002; Smith, et al., 2010; Denham, 2016). While a sense of personal identity with the region of Appalachia has for decades been considered by multiple scholars, it is understood to be enmeshed within a dynamic web of historical and social complexities (Billings, 2006; Cooper et al., 2011; Holtkamp & Weaver, 2018). Place has also been pointed to as a critical element of personal identity among those who live in the region (Shapiro, 1983; Stanley, 2012). Fisher considered such a place-based identity to be "an intentional act of resistance that grounds individuals, who otherwise face demeaning representations of themselves, and leads outward toward solidarity with others" (Smith, et al., 2010, p. 56). This idea is seen as well in the critical regionalism perspective of hooks (2009), whose understanding of spatial consciousness offers potential for resistance.

Included in the AOHP collection are a significant number of oral histories conducted with Black participants. As in the dominant historical narrative of America, these voices have remained underrepresented in the prevailing scholarship of the Appalachian region (Smith, 2004). Cultural representations and conceptions of Appalachia have likewise largely ignored the presence and contributions of Black residents as have most attempts to describe and analyze the region's economy and history (Hayden, 2004). According to Hayden (2002), a perception exists both within and outside Appalachia, "that whites are the only significant group living there and/or that other groups are so small that their presence in the region is of little consequence" (p. 124). The lack of recognition of the Black experience in a more complete understanding of Appalachia is further amplified by the fact that large numbers of Black Americans left the region as part of the Great Migration out of the South in the first part of the 20th Century (Brown, 2016; 2018). Wilkerson (2010) pointed to this exodus as a collective act of resistance, one crucial to the beginnings of the larger movement for civil rights. Nevertheless, a continued sense of identity with the region among Blacks who had moved away from Appalachia endured as did an intense connection to the customs and ways of life in the mountains they left behind (Wagner & Obermiller, 2004). According to Wagner and Obermiller (2004), such connections to the region persisted because of a more deeply felt sense of community among residents in the coal towns of the region where labor movements fostered a more progressive social structure and an arguably larger sense of social egalitarianism than places in the Deep South. Even in a kind of exile, these former residents of the region maintained a sense of connection to their Appalachian roots.

Despite the breadth of material it contains, and the significant work that went into creating the collection, not so very long after the AOHP was completed, the cassette tapes were filed neatly away, shoved into a library closet, and locked in the dark to gather dust. Though not entirely forgotten, the materials in the collection were certainly rendered inaccessible. As the decades passed, however, fewer people even knew of its existence.

According to Shopes (1981), this is not uncommon for oral history projects, even those of such scale and scope as the AOHP. Though they may begin with lofty goals, such projects tend to foster an enthusiasm that is short-lived and end up doing little to enhance the collective historical consciousness of a community. Class and race divides between the organizers of such projects, and the community members who participate in them, only serve to make the limitations more pronounced. As such, Hamilton and Shopes (2008) argued that oral history as practice can become semi-privatized and marginal with, "thousands and thousands of tapes lying

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unused in drawers and archives" (p. vii). Hamilton and Shopes (2008) additionally pointed out that scholarship within the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies has neglected to make use of oral history as central to the study of communities where memory and history are bound up tightly with an understanding of the place. Further consideration is necessary of the potential offered by oral history to both reflect collective memory and identity and to inform our understanding of these concepts.

As the AOHP was initiated some fifty years ago, the oral histories contained in the collection were conducted during a time barely removed from the days of segregation and Jim Crow. Many of the interviews were conducted with Black residents of Virginia, a state that in 1968 was finally forced by the U.S. Supreme Court to fully comply with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision that had been reached well over a decade before (Bonastia, 2012). At the insistence of Senator Harry Byrd, Virginia, like several other southern states, had instituted a policy of massive resistance to the Brown decision by enacting laws in open defiance of integration, even completely shutting down some public school systems (Ely, 1976). Such wounds would have most certainly remained fresh for those interviewed as part of the AOHP. Stark injustices overtly sanctioned by the state would have been no distant memory when they sat down with their interviewers and shared their stories. Their own voices confirm this. Interviewees spoke in blunt terms of struggles for regular employment, equal wages, simple respect, the tiresome accumulation of routine daily abuses, and the ordinary system of oppression they endured day after day (Lampkins 1973). The recorded voices offered remembrances of family members who had been enslaved, treated as mere chattel, and forced to endure bloody beatings and other inhuman brutalities (Axon, 1973).

This project illustrates ways that collections like the AOHP, when made accessible through digitization, can be more effectively utilized to explore issues and questions of Black identity and experience in the Appalachian region and elsewhere. The keeping of important historical material locked away in a closet as it disintegrates prevents the examination of vital questions and, more significantly, contributes to the continued silencing of unheard voices. The intersection of new forms of archival work and historical scholarship now provide a crucial opportunity to enhance what we know of place and identity and allows for stories to be reclaimed by the people and communities from which they came. As argued by Swain (2003), any significant impact of oral history collections like the AOHP in the coming years is dependent upon cooperation among information science professionals with varied perspectives, on a willingness by scholars to collaborate beyond the constraints of academic disciplines, and on a willingness to promote and create access using digital technologies.

Such work has important implications for issues of social justice within the field of information sciences and serves as an example of a critical approach to digital archival development. The use of digital platforms for the creation and promotion of access to material that would otherwise remain unseen helps to counter dominant historical and social narratives and serves as a means of bearing witness to vital elements of history that have been largely overlooked in scholarship and popular culture. Tools of digital scholarship offer untold possibilities for interaction and engagement with important source material, reinvigorate and reshape professional archival work, and relocate archives to the front lines of the fight for equity and a more participatory democracy. Materials like those found in the AOHP are a source of empowerment for members of communities whose voices might otherwise go unheard, helps fill unjust gaps in the dominant historical narrative, and offers a broader and more equitable approach to the creation of history.

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Methods

This study made use of ethnographic methods through participant observation and personal interviews. An ethnographic perspective is not entirely absent from the field of information sciences, though it is certainly not pervasive (Goodman, 2011). Not all questions of information can be quantified or best answered through experimental research. In particular, methods of observation and interpretation are useful to the discipline for the production of knowledge (Allard et al., 2009; Bawden & Robinson, 2012). As it involves direct interaction with participants, ethnography attempts to gain a better understanding of a particular social world from an insider's perspective and thus serves as an important tool for the study of issues of identity (Schubotz, 2020). Ethnographic methods allow, through access to self-understandings, for an immersive exploration of the ways in which identity is enacted through ordinary and quotidian contexts (Adams, 2009).

According to Angrosino (2007), participant observation, personal interviewing, and archival research serve as the primary means of data collection in ethnography. Careful observation and participation in the lives of those under study generates data that is analyzed to find patterns of human experience. Further, such a qualitative approach to research offers participants an avenue for explaining a social phenomenon in their own terms and seeks to understand how humans make meaning of their social world and how that meaning affects their behavior (Punch, 2014). In this way, ethnographic methods seek a more distinct representation of complex structures and patterns found in the social world.

Finally, as ethnography itself is understood not only as method but also as genre, it does not attempt to create objective truth so much as to build empathy and solidarity (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rorty, 1989). This research does not claim to be ethnography, but it does invoke an ethnographic spirit (Barker & Jane, 2016). De Leon (2015) argued that there exists no usefulness in a sterile text, and the data are reported within this narrative in a way decidedly distinct from the typical framework of an academic paper. To utilize elements of ethnography as method is one way to give poetic expression to the voices of those who otherwise exist on the margins. Such an approach is additionally a way to explore so-called black holes, or places that remain tragically understudied (Fassin, 2013). Within these intersections of theory, method, and discipline is found space for information science research that wholly embraces the political and the fight for social justice.

Drawn from the AOHP collection, several digital audio files were played individually for five Black residents of the same community in which the original oral histories were conducted. The digital files of the original tapes varied in length but were generally between one half hour to one hour in duration. Participants were free to listen to as much or as little of the audio recordings as they wished and to move on to another file at any point. In this way, the scope of participants' direct engagement with the oral histories was entirely their own choice. Some listened longer than other participants. Some listened to individual files for more or less than others. Participants themselves determined this specific operational detail of the research methodology.

The selection of this number of participants followed the principle of a purposeful sampling strategy, one that is commonly used in qualitative research designs that seek to identify and select information-rich case examples and to make the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2015). Patton further stated that "information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (264) in order

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to gain deeper understanding. The participants were selected by the researcher based on their lifelong membership in the community and on their connections of kinship to original interviewees who participated in the AOHP. Participants were not compensated but were provided with digital copies of any audio files from the oral history collection they wished to have.

As each participant listened to the oral history files, reactions, body language, and unspoken responses were observed and noted by the researcher. In addition to these observation notes, further qualitative data were collected through personal interviews designed to be open-ended and conversational. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), personal interviews get to the very heart of the purposes of such research and are utilized to solicit an in-depth understanding of events, to gather insights and information about a particular social phenomenon, to build trust with participants, and to make sense of the subtleties of social relationships. Interviews serve to augment our understanding of the rich complexity of the social world and, of equal importance, to give voice to research participants (Brancati, 2018; Flick, 2014).

No standardized interview instrument was used for these conversations. Rather, the interviews were purposefully unstructured in order to provide flexibility, enhance rapport, and generate meaningful discussions led by the reactions and responses of the participants. Such an approach is understood to be conducive to the exploration of issues and subjects generated directly by participants and also allows the research to bear witness to events and phenomena as seen through the eyes of those directly involved (Hammersley & Gomm, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Audio recordings of the interviews, along with typewritten transcripts, were created by the researcher. In recounting the research findings below, each participant is identified using a pseudonym.

Meaning and Encounters

Mrs. Glover knew that her kin and neighbors many years ago had offered their stories to something important. With little prompting, she ticked off a litany of their names, described their faces, and pointed out where their homes and barns once stood. Yet, in the fifty years since, Mrs. Glover had never seen or listened to the taped recordings. Most of the people Mrs. Glover knew, who were interviewed for the AOHP, worked their entire lives for Emory & Henry College, an institution that refused to educate their children, and they knew full well that the buildings they cleaned and maintained were built of bricks made by their own ancestors who had been enslaved by the college (Stevenson, 1963). In spite of this, when students from that same institution came knocking on their doors, asking to record their stories, they spoke into the cassette recorders and freely handed them over. Their motivations for participating in the project cannot be fully known, but those interviewed were offered no compensation other than contributing to a community history project that sought to tell a story that was not a part of the dominant historical narrative. According to Atherton et al. (2017), there are a wide range of motivating factors that may determine why someone chooses to be interviewed as part of an oral history project, but these are generally related to a sense of being heard, of preserving important stories, and of educating younger listeners.

Throughout the conversation, Mrs. Glover rubbed her hands together continuously, absentmindedly, and in a way that did not hide the tension she appeared to be trying to knead from her fingers. Her nails were a blazing red, the polish chipped and nicked at the corners and edges. An artist, Mrs. Glover's hands are the implements of her craft. She had seated herself and

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her guest in a front room, a space clearly intended to be formal. A small, round, glass-topped table stood between the chairs and was littered with small porcelain curiosities, as was every other surface in the room. Mementos and tokens sat and hung wherever there was space. The carpet, the upholstery, and the furnishings all reflected a kind of stateliness and refinement, all satiny white fabrics and darkly varnished woods.

Mrs. Glover had placed examples of her artwork at different points around the room. There were canvases big and small, some leaning against furniture, others against the wall. These served as an impromptu gallery of sorts. Her art is created with oil paints, but it is given dimension and texture through the incorporation of buttons, bits of hair, broken clothes pins, and all manner of detritus. Mrs. Glover is a storyteller in her community. There were portraits, landscapes, and images of children at play and women at work. There were stooped men in vast fields of cotton, their overseers, whips in hand, burning them with cold eyes while dark and menacing skies bear down upon their backs. Some of the faces were contorted and misshapen.

As the first recording began to play, she nodded along, issuing now and again a hummed assent from her pursed lips. Then, something she heard prompted her to laugh and a spell was broken. Her face opened wide in smile.

"That's right," she said, "that's right. That's the way it was."

When she spoke, Mrs. Glover pushed forward into her words as if she could not hold back. She had a story to tell, one that was important, one that has not been heard enough. Reaching to the floor beside her own chair, she pulled up a sheaf of papers scrawled with notes. The bundle of pages was large, each covered in her handwriting and devoted to a different person, each of whom was connected in some way to the AOHP, either having been interviewed themselves or related to someone else who had. Mrs. Glover told stories of them all, in the process telling, too, her own story. She explained that she considers herself a keeper of memory in the community and had long wondered what had become of the oral histories that had been shared all those years earlier. Mrs. Glover recognized the voices on the cassette tapes, could picture in her mind the people who spoke into the recorder those decades ago because she had known them all. In certain moments, listening to the recordings, her eyes would at first close tightly, her jaw set, and when she opened them again, she seemed to be looking off somewhere beyond the room in which she sat.

Mr. Johnson wanted to first hear the voice of his grandmother. He sat back deeply into an oversized chair, his hands fingering the hat he had worn in and removed before sitting down. Retired for a number of years, he considers himself a genealogist, and has researched his family lineage deep into the past, back to the days when records of Blacks in the community included only first names or descriptions and, with more precision, their value as property. It had been his grandmother who spurred his initial energies for such work. Mr. Johnson's childhood was filled with stories she told him. In his own old age, he has become the keeper of the stories, and he knows his family tree as well as he knows his own two hands. Having put together so much of the puzzle, he longs for more. He searches for pictures, objects, and lost graves.

Like Mrs. Glover, he knew that many of his family members and neighbors had shared their stories many years ago through a project done by the college up the road, but he had never heard them, and had never known that the recordings still exist. When handed the photocopy of the original AOHP index, before thumbing through it, he looked up.

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"You have my grandmother in here. I know. She told me about it. Can I listen to it?"

As the recording began, there was much static and extraneous noise in the background. The voices were barely audible as if spoken into a can. Mr. Johnson pushed his head forward just a bit, straining to hear. Then, as if a door had been opened, the voice turned clear and crisp. Mr. Johnson sat back again, his hands gripping the armrests of the chair. He looked straight ahead for a time, listening. When the interviewer on the tape finally spoke, the voice much louder, Mr. Johnson broke into laughter, doubling over. He had heard his younger sister's voice on the recording. It was she who did the interview, a fact he had not known. His laughter settled, and he righted himself, but now tears glistened in his eyes. Mr. Johnson listened to the entire recording, silent, nodding his head.

After listening to his grandmother's oral history, Mr. Johnson looked for a very long time through the AOHP index, calling out the names of the people he recognized, offering remembrances, but also describing in meticulous detail the network of kinship he has mapped over the years. There were so many recordings Mr. Johnson wished to hear, that time became short and eventually we gave over to playing just snippets of dozens of files.

"The voices take me back," he said. "Way back."

Before leaving, though, Mr. Johnson pulled from an inside jacket pocket a worn cassette tape, the handwriting on the label smudged and faded. He had brought with him a tape recording of a conversation with his mother to which he had been unable to listen, having tried the only cassette player he could find, one that remains in the car of a friend. The tape is thirty years old. He asked if it could be added to the collection, but more than anything, he simply wanted to hear it. After two days, the digitized file was sent to Mr. Johnson who called back to express his gratitude.

"More fond memories," he said.

Ms. Green is nearly eighty years old. In her aged voice, some of her words seemed to mash into one another and become indistinct. She rarely made eye contact unless she wanted to underscore a point. This she would usually do by saying,

"Can you believe that?"

The question punctuated stories about segregated schools, long bus trips to the next county, men who felt their only real chance in the world was to be found in military service, backbreaking work for insultingly low wages, walking miles to a job that offered little in return, and daily, ordinary humiliations and insults. She also told stories of resilience, of parents who endured indignities and slights and who toiled in hope for some brighter future that lay just over the horizon for their children.

These were prompted by every recording Ms. Green listened to from the AOHP files, sometimes only a few seconds in. She was helped to a rocking chair by a caregiver who comes to her house daily. It was unclear if Ms. Green knew of the oral histories or had forgotten them, but she recognized the names and remembered the houses and road names where they had been born or had lived. The recording that Ms. Green listened to longer than any other was of a Black man who had shared his oral history when he was still young himself. He was her nephew who had served in the Korean War, commanding a unit of men, only to come back to face the patronizing

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treatment of white supervisors at work who assumed him to be only qualified for menial jobs. In frustration, he had gone into business for himself, and had spoken with pride about the independence this had afforded him, and the sense of dignity and empowerment he had found. He spoke with clear anger about the limitations placed on Blacks and the all-out effort to hold them back.

"I'll tell you why he was mad," said Ms. Green.

The story she told was of how this young man had been blocked from purchasing a home in a newly developed subdivision in the town that was the county seat and known for its well-to-do neighborhoods and attorney's offices. He had dared a realtor not to show him the home and then secured a loan from a local bank. But when other residents had learned of the impending purchase, he had been threatened repeatedly, and received calls and letters describing what would happen if he moved in.

"That was normal, of course. We thought he was crazy for thinking he could."

Ms. Green then said she was tired. She was finished listening.

Mr. Williams said,

"You know, the word history *is usually just that.* His *story. Not ours."*

His hands rested on a kitchen table, a cup of coffee in front of him. Mr. Williams was not as much interested in hearing the files as he was in celebrating their existence. He described his own complicated relationship with the community he called home. According to him, in younger days, Mr. Williams had been less disciplined, far more interested in carousing and spending time with friends who also had *"the things of the flesh"* on their minds. He considered this time in his life to be full of anger and rage—especially as he daily rode a bus nearly an hour each way to the segregated Black school. Mr. Williams had been raised by his mother in a small house on what he termed "the other side of the tracks." He had seen no future for himself in such a backward place.

With the help of his mother, Mr. Williams cultivated his natural talents and attended an art school far from home. It was on return visits and then, later, when his mother suddenly died, that he found himself drawn back to his native ground. A former teacher, now retired and heavily involved in the community, took him under her wing, shared the history of the place, and helped him to recognize the vital part of the story that had been ignored. It was through this experience that Mr. Williams took on the responsibility of making that story known. He became a leader of a nonprofit group that worked to restore an abandoned former Black church in his hometown by turning it into a museum and community space for public gatherings focused on racial dialogue.

Each recording he listened to spurred in Mr. Williams a new idea for their utilization in historical programs for the entire community. He was especially interested in hearing the oral histories from former teachers who had served as mentors and guides to young people during a time when it seemed they faced barriers to realizing their full potential no matter which way they turned.

"This stuff is important," he said. It must be shared."

The thing Ms. Smith said most clearly and forcefully was this: her faith in God had been

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sustenance to her. When she has had no faith in her country, government, or neighbors to treat her fairly and with dignity and respect—to recognize her humanity—she had turned to something higher and far more powerful in her eyes. Her whole life, it seemed, nothing had been fair as each day was a struggle for hope that things would change. Religious faith had provided her only sustained source of such hope. But Ms. Smith clarified that this hope was not any passive acceptance or understanding that her lot would be improved only in a life to come after this one. Instead, she saw her hope as a kind of critique of the status quo lived out in a multitude of forms of resistance. This is what Ms. Smith heard in the voices on the recordings of the AOHP. For her, the oral histories she listened to reflected this more than anything else: ordinary lives and stories that reflected an uncommon and unflagging resistance.

Ms. Smith also heard compassion that she did not understand. She wondered how anger did not overwhelm the people to whom she listened, and then immediately noted this would have been necessary in order to protect their lives and the lives of their families. If such anger could have found release, she said,

"There would have been enough anger for us to blow this country up. And that's the truth."

When asked if she thought it was fair or just that the materials in AOHP would be used by a white person to complete research important to a professional academic career, Ms. Smith did not equivocate.

"Lord, no. It is not. But it needs to be told. It's a history that has not been told and the more people who know about it, the more people will know how it really was. So, no, it's not fair, but I still think it's important."

Reclamation

This research had been envisioned and designed as a conversation across time. Participants would be observed as they interacted with the voices of those who long ago told their own stories of what it meant to be Black in Appalachia. The intention was to play, for each respondent, selected portions of the oral histories from the AOHP collection in order to spark dialogue about the recordings and about the participants' own reaction and response to them. This aim was met, but the chasm between expectations and reality turned out to be vast.

There were definitive responses to the subjects and issues raised all those years ago by those originally interviewed. Of far more significance, though, was that participants were prompted to share their own stories. In telling these stories, the participants reclaimed the voices and the memories of the AOHP. Mrs. Glover, Mr. Johnson, Ms. Green, Mr. Williams, and Ms. Smith are the ones who own it, they and the rest of the community. The oral histories in the AOHP do not belong to an institution. The material does not belong only to researchers or scholars. By making it accessible and available, the collection and all the voices it contains will be reclaimed.

Frisch (1990) argued that "oral history is a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context and how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them" (p. 188). Such projects, Frisch (1990) also stated, should offer opportunities for shared knowledges, for both implicit and explicit dialogue among a variety of perspectives about the shape of history, its

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meanings, and its implications. This dialogue can foster a more democratized and more widely shared kind of historical consciousness that is representative of a wider range of experience and perspectives.

Utilizing oral history in the creation of digital scholarship that increases accessibility and opportunities for wider engagement offers a more complete history created from voices long silenced. In such work, professionals in the field of information science can advocate for justice and equity and can create spaces of resistance in a multitude of ways (Mehra & Gray, 2014). This is a way to enlarge history and to fill the silences. As a tool of advocacy, "oral history was intended to give a voice to the voiceless, a narrative to the story-less and power to the marginalized" (Abrams, 2010, p. 154). Collections like the AOHP can be a central focal point in the utilization of information technologies to create a more complete archive, one that is more accessible and engaging in presenting information through a wide range of media. Giroux (1993; 2002) argued that technologies can reshape structures of power and support a truer democracy, one that is empowering rather than repressive, and that actually embodies freedom for all. In addition to Giroux's conception, democracy is generally characterized by legal equality, political freedom, and the rule of law (Diamond & Morlino, 2005). Information science practitioners are vital to the creation of transformative learning spaces in which marginalized groups can "gain a sense of themselves as public actors while developing connections to the broader world" (Eryaman, 2010, p. 134). Everyone understands their own power and agency more fully if given opportunity to interpret their own lives, to see themselves in history, and to know the ways they shape its creation. We all in turn are then gifted a larger history, one less silent than before.

According to Portelli (1991), the embodied practice of oral history provides a distinctive opportunity for consciousness raising for both the interviewer and the person being interviewed. This work is made meaningful by the encounter of two subjects who recognize one another's shared humanity and who seek to build common ground upon their differences. Yet, this discovering and exploring, this meaning making, cannot occur if an oral history collection is left in the dark to gather dust. It must be returned to those whom it belonged in the first place. It must be reclaimed.

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