Thursday, August 16 • 1:30pm - 2:30pm
203 - From Best Practices to "Next Practices": Documenting Underrepresented Communities through Oral Histories
Panelists present information on a wide range of projects, from the Densho Project, a large community-based oral history project about Japanese American experience, to Oregon State University's collaborative efforts to document Latinx and LGBTQ+ communities, to the Inland Northwest Black History Collection. The discussion that follows covers methods used for collection development and access, factors promoting collaboration, and ethical challenges involved in approaching and curating projects documenting underrepresented communities.

My name is Natalia Fernández, and I am the curator of the Oregon Multicultural Archives and OSU Queer Archives, both of which are housed at Oregon State University. My mission is to collaborate with LGBTQIA and communities of color to empower them to preserve, share, and celebrate their stories. My work includes collection development, instruction, and exhibit curation – and of course oral history projects. Today I will discuss two of my oral history projects: one is the product of a collaboration with a history class that focused on the local LGBTQ+ community and the second is called “Latinos en Oregón” that has so far, expanded to the Latinx communities within four counties in the state of Oregon.
As has been argued by many scholars, as well as my colleagues who already shared information about their projects, for communities who have been traditionally marginalized in both the historical record and in historiography, oral histories can be a form of empowerment, a way in which community members can literally add their voice to the historical narrative. In addition, the process of a community sharing its stories can create personal opportunities for self-reflection, an appreciation for the struggles endured, and a celebration of the community’s accomplishments thus far.

In her 2016 article, Jessica Wagner Webster includes a literature review regarding scholars’ perspectives on the role of archivists in conducting oral history interviews. The quotes are from her article, which I recommend you read if you have not done so already.
As part of her article, Wagner Webster conducted a survey of current archival practitioners to learn their perceptions of oral history projects – and she asked about limitations to initiating and sustaining projects. These factors are likely quite familiar to you – I know for me, they rang true. The main factors being “low staff/resources” and “limited time.”

Notably, the “No support” factor was not just limited to no institutional support, it was also lack of buy-in from potential interviewees – something that I have experienced and is not surprising when working with traditionally under-documented communities (I will share more on that later).
This chart, also from Wagner Webster’s article, shows the oral history project themes reported as part of her survey. My work falls within the themes LGBT and Race/Ethnicity.

The two projects I will speak to are the results of collaborations that enable - in one case, university students and in another, community members – the opportunity to engage with their local communities by conducting oral history interviews with groups that are traditionally underrepresented within the archival record. These groups include members of the LGBTQ+ community in the Corvallis area, as well as members within Oregon’s Latinx communities.
More specifically, for the past two years, I have collaborated with the OSU history course “Lesbian and Gay Movements in Modern America” to train students to conduct oral history interviews with members of the local county community.

And, for the past three years, I have collaborated with various Latinx community organizations, as well as historical societies and museums, across the state of Oregon to train members of the local community to conduct oral history interviews with fellow members of their local county Latinx community.
The bulk of my presentation will focus on these three components of oral history projects:

Methods for Collection Development and Promoting Collaboration
   Collaborating with Community Liaison(s)
   Training Interviewers to Conduct Oral History Interviews
   Celebrating the Interviewees and the Stories Shared

Providing Access to the Stories Gathered

Ethical challenges involved in approaching and curating projects documenting underrepresented communities
For the OSU Queer Archives Oral History Project, I collaborated with an upper division history course in which students conducted interviews with members of the local county’s LGBTQ+ community and its allies.

One of the most fruitful class sessions was one in which I conducted a live oral history interview, and afterwards, co-facilitated a number of small group activities for students to brainstorm interview questions for their interviewees.

Other successes within the class included students conducting pre-interviews with their interviewees, the use of an interview check list, and an end of the course reception in the archives for all the students and interviewees to gather and celebrate.

In total, two course collaborations have resulted in 20 interviews added to the OSU Queer Archives.
To provide access to the interviews, we have an LGBTQ+ Voices Site.

On the back end, we use The Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), a web-based system that enables interviews to be time-coded and indexed.

On the front-end, we use Omeka, an open-source web publishing platform commonly used for virtual exhibits.
Although describing the details of OHMS is beyond the scope of this presentation, I highly recommend that you look into it. We still create finding aids for our oral history collections, but in terms of providing access and not having to create transcripts, OHMS has been wonderful.

Notably, Doug Boyd, director of the University of Kentucky Libraries Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, is to receive SAAs Archival Innovator Award this year because of his work developing OHMS. It is a highly-used / proven successful method.
In terms of some challenges associated with this project...

Need to adequately represent the diversity within the LGBTQIA community
   We know we are lacking representation in terms of various aspects of the community: age (youth), people of color, and the rural population – and this is something we intend to address with our next collaboration in Winter 2019

Need to address privacy concerns
   I recently experienced an instance in which an interviewee said their oral history interview was too accessible (someone from their past contacted them about), so I took it offline

Need to use appropriate terminology for collection finding aids and oral history metadata
   I recommended the 2018 article “An Exploration into Archival Descriptions of LGBTQ Materials” that talks about the importance of being really mindful of the terminology used in archival finding aids. OSQA is really fortunate to have graduate student workers from the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies masters program at OSU who are very familiar with the appropriate terms to use.
Switc\[\text{hing gears to discuss my second project...}

For the *Latinos en Oregón* oral history project, due to its geographic scope of now being in 4 counties relatively far from my location, I needed to develop a model that would ensure project capacity and sustainability. This meant seeing myself more as an oral history consultant and project archivist who worked in collaboration with a variety of partners that together were the ones to lead the project efforts within their respective communities.

Using the “train the trainer” model for this project has facilitated more project autonomy for the local communities as well as more time for me to focus on facilitating interview access and working on metadata creation. Another successful project component has been creating unique google drive accounts for each project team to share content such as training materials, as well as interview files, for me to download and archive.

Also, with each community determining how to showcase the stories gathered, communities are able to both celebrate the stories gathered thus far and encourage others to share their histories. Examples include playing interview clips as part of local events and curating exhibits within local historical societies.
This collection is not in OHMS – the finding aid is still a work in progress. I am attempting to create my first bilingual finding aid – so all the metadata, including the bios and summaries, are either Spanish-only or are in both Spanish and English (many of the interviews are in Spanish).

If you are have non-English collections, I recommend you read the 2014 article “Breaking the Language Barrier: Describing Chicano Archives with Bilingual Finding Aids” that explains process used by Arizona State University to make their collections accessible via both English and Spanish Language finding aids.

My future goal is to add these interviews to OHMS
The challenges with this project are very similar to the ones I shared regarding the LGBTQ+ community:

Need to adequately represent the diversity within the Latinx community (while respecting the decision of some community members to not share their stories)

Continued conversations with community liaisons to develop interviewee lists

Need to address privacy and legal concerns

I have been asked about anonymous OHs and have heard many “off the record” stories

Need to use appropriate language for collection finding aids and oral history metadata

This requires dedicated bilingual staff time – i.e. me and bilingual student workers
With experience come lessons learned:

- First, be sure to build relationships with individuals who have pre-existing, strong, and trusting relationships with community members. And, when working with community liaisons and project partners, develop strategies to reduce potential biases in project participant selection — examples include: creating an interviewee demographics spreadsheet, establishing a diverse project advisory board, and developing a project promotion plan.

- Develop workshops to directly train interviewers and well as developing “train the trainer” workshops in order to build project capacity and sustainability. When training interviewers, provide guidance regarding interviewing standards but also be open to the community’s specific needs — examples include sharing interview question templates that are adaptable to each interviewee, as well as determining recording equipment options that are user-friendly, affordable, and if possible, create archival quality files.
- When providing access to the stories gathered, discuss and plan how to best share the interviews with the community itself to ensure the community’s benefit above that of scholars and non-community members – examples include the use of social media and content access through local historical society archives

- Brainstorm to implement ways to celebrate the stories shared
  However, when planning for project celebrations, be clear about your role based on your availability and desire to participate, but of course, strongly encourage community celebration and promotion of the stories gathered – examples include curating exhibits within local community centers and/or organizing public programming featuring both project partners and interviewees themselves
Thank you and I look forward to our Q & A and discussion

Moderator Starter Questions

Documenting Underrepresented Communities
I’m going to return to the statement by Jessica Wagner Webster in my intro to this panel, which is that “oral history has long been a tool used by historians, archivists, and other scholars to help fill gaps in the documentary record.” Pushing this a little further, oral history projects may have political implications. For example, documenting discrimination can be used to inform efforts to reform policies or statutes. In terms of your own projects, to what extent do you think about the political implications of your projects and to what extent does this impact project design?

Implications of political policy and intimidation on potential interviewees – some interviewees do not want to share their stories due to fear (cancelation of Eugene, OR World Refugee Day oral history project earlier this summer)
Collaborations Between Archives and Oral Historians/Oral History Projects

A tricky part of designing an oral history project is ensuring the documented group has input on a project so that the end product benefits the community as well your institution. What was your process for gathering community input? What do you think worked well? Any lessons learned?

For the “documented group to have input on the project” I work with the community liaisons / my collaborators to provide that input. It’s the challenge of lack of time and resources for me personally to host focus groups and ask for input from all the potential interviewees. If I do the interviewer, I send the interviewees the questions beforehand (with mixed results – usually they do not respond). In training the interviewers, I make sure to strongly encourage setting up a non-recorded pre-interview for the interviewer and interviewee to meet.

Sustainability

Jean Dryden once argued that archivists should be weary of taking on oral history projects in light of backlogs and the myriad other responsibilities with which archivists are tasked. My question to the panel is what lessons have you or your organization learned about creating achievable and sustainable oral history projects and/or programs? Have you encountered any snags that have cost the project time and resources? Do you have any pointers to improving efficiency with regards to processing or managing oral history collections?

It was a huge help to have a couple of my other colleagues begin oral history projects of their own (OSU 150 and OHBA) – more people doing this type of work meant I had more support i.e. the technology (OHMS), equipment, and moral support / advocacy within the department for the work.