Words and Silences

Volume Number 12 Article #7

2025
Issue Theme: Oral History in a Digital and Audiovisual World — Rio de Janeiro (2023)

The Role of Narrator Compensation in the Case for Reparations And Restitution

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*Original language

Recommended Citation
Funderburk, Alissa Rae and García, Fanny Julissa (2023) "The Role of Narrator Compensation in the Case for Reparations And Restitution" *Words and Silences:* Vol. #12, Article #7.
Available at:
https://ioha.org/journal/articles/7-the-role-of-narrator-compensation-in-the-case-for-reparations-and-restitution/

Words and Silences is the Digital Edition Journal of the International Oral History Association.
It includes articles from a wide range of disciplines and is a means for members of the oral history community to share projects and current trends from around the world.

Online ISSN 2222-4181

Title: **The Role of Narrator Compensation in the Case for Reparations And Restitution**

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Fanny Julissa García is a Honduran American oral historian contributing work to Central American studies with a focus on applied oral history, a term she coined to describe how oral histories can be used to educate, inform policy change, and support communities endangered by state-inflicted violence. Her award-winning work focuses on immigration justice, detention and incarceration, family separation, and the transnational impact of failed border policies. She recently received the OHA and NEH Oral History Fellowship and is now the Editorial Program Manager for Voice of Witness. She received her AA in English from Los Angeles Valley College, a BA in English from UCLA, and an MA in Oral History from Columbia University.

Abstract:

This paper poses the question of what it would look like to ensure monetary compensation for narrators who have suffered the effects of state-inflicted violence. Building on the work of oral historians like Anna Bryson and Ronald Grele, as well as human rights scholars such as Chris Cunneen and Eliscia Kinder, this paper broaches the topic of reparations and restitution as a part of oral history practice even beyond narrator compensation. How should oral historians and the institutions that support memory work respond to current calls for reparations and/or restitution? Given that much of the field of oral history has historically rejected or at least not prioritized the need to consider compensation for narrators, it is past time that we as oral historians today begin to not only ensure that the work of recording their stories is beneficial to our narrators financially, but that we advocate against the injustices they face and help them to seek recompense for the wrongs they have endured from the state.

As conduits for public engagement with history, it is our responsibility not only to draw attention to this issue but to stand on the front lines in imagining and creating more meaningful dialogue around the issue of reparations and restitution. The goal of this paper is to propose considerations for narrator compensation in the field of oral history in projects focused on documenting instances of systemic racism for which the US government ought to make amends, such as current immigration policies (specifically those including family separation), slavery, police violence, and wrongful incarceration. To this end, we intend to provide specific examples of similar past instances for which such requests for reparations and restitution have been met and identify the ways oral history has been used to bring justice to narrators harmed by violence and racism in the past. What might a consideration of these types of reparative practices look like in the project design, budgetary decisions, community relations, interviewing, archival practices, and public presentation of narrative materials?

Introduction

In recent years, the desire of the American public to hold the government, corporations, institutions, and even individuals accountable for gross injustices has grown to a fever pitch. Events like the murder of George Floyd and the January 6th insurrection, which sparked uprisings in 2020 and 2021, are just two examples. Even colleges and universities have found themselves accounting for their histories of violence, including paying reparations for their past participation in slavery. In a similar vein, this paper aims to address how those oral historians associated with academia may also contribute to this type of accountability. When it comes to engaging the public, how might we determine the ethical responsibilities of an oral history academic? As oral historians, we are trained to research our narrators, listen deeply, empathize, and build relationships of co-creation that extend beyond the interview. While we are not therapists or social workers, what obligation ought we have to narrators who have suffered state-inflicted violence in particular? While we might not have the finances to supply them with very much aid or other resources, whether freelance or backed by an institution, should we not feel some responsibility to advocate for them and their wellbeing?

Sheftel and Zembrzycki's "Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with 'Difficult' Stories," reflects on the work of oral historians who deal with stories involving trauma and crisis, and the importance of managing oral

history projects grappling with both, with care.[1] Funderburk and Garcia (the authors of this article) work with populations that hold embodied physical and mental memories of racism and xenophobia. We believe strongly that vulnerable communities and individuals enlisted to share their experiences as a contribution to the historical record should be compensated for their time and labor. What would it look like to incorporate compensation as well as advocacy for reparations within this practice of oral history? Oftentimes in oral history, two worlds collide, and in the case of those oral history projects involving the documentation of institutional racism and xenophobia, serious concerns arise regarding the power dynamics within such an interview. This is typically called the Insider/Outsider issue. Because of this, we should first explain our positionality as women of color and the work that we do.

As the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded oral historian for the Margaret Walker Center (MWC) at Jackson State University (JSU), Alissa Rae Funderburk finds herself in an interesting position in multiple ways. Being grant-funded, her status as a salaried state employee is temporary, putting her in a position of both security and precarity. Located in Jackson, Mississippi, JSU's existence as an HBCU also represents a tightrope of sorts between the work of social justice activism, a history of civil rights, and the world of academia. She maintains an oral history archive that, like the MWC, is dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and disseminating African American history and culture. This allows Funderburk to do oral history and advocate for narrators in ways

[1] Sheftel, Anna, and Stacey Zembrzycki. "Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with 'Difficult' Stories." The Oral History Review 37, no. 2 (2010): 191–214. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41440802.

that underemployed or freelance oral historians may not but also means she too can understand limited funding and reliance on outside sources for budget items like narrator compensation. As a Black woman, Funderburk's location in one of the Blackest cities in America (according to the 2020 census), allows her to focus on research revolving around a predominantly Black community that resonates with her identity.

In 2022, the Oral History Association and the National Endowment of the Humanities awarded Fanny Julissa Garcia with a year-long oral history fellowship to continue phase two of "Separated: An Oral History Project." The project documents the life histories of families impacted by the "zero tolerance" immigration policy, which forcibly separated parents from their children at the U.S./Mexico border. With an intimate knowledge of life as an immigrant due to her undocumented immigration journey from Honduras to the United States, Garcia's oral history practice centers on the documentation of whole life experiences that de-center traumatic narratives as an identifying part of the immigration story. During interviews with narrators, traumatic experiences are honored along with stories of resistance, solidarity, culture, and even humor. She coined the term "applied oral history" to define oral history practices that seek to first and foremost serve the community from whence the project emerges and to raise consciousness and contribute to policy change aimed at social justice and equity. In applied oral history, the goal is not for the research to serve the institution or the archive, but instead for the research to serve the narrators.

As women of color, we understand questions about where research comes from and where responsibility should reside. In our cultural understanding of a community, we believe that as much as possible, this kind of research should be done by a person within the community, preferably someone who shares experiences, not just language, race, or color. What happens in cases where there is no funding and oral historians are working on projects as labors of love? How can you thrive and survive in the work that you're doing if your work can't benefit those who help to make it possible? This is a question of ethics: are you the right person to do this work if you are not willing or able to provide some form of compensation to your narrators? Just because you can record an interview does not always mean you should be the one doing an oral history. It is not okay to ignore the hardship of our narrators just because it may pose a hardship for ourselves. As academics, even when we are unpaid for our labor, we may bolster our resumes and eventually better our financial situation because of the impact that labor has on the cache of our careers. But we cannot observe these marginalized communities and then ignore the fact that our narrators were "made" vulnerable and require assistance. If we're committed to doing this work, the goal must go beyond simply preserving history and must include some benefit for our narrators as well.

Oral History's Origin Story

Many oral historians, especially in America, were taught to use colonizer-settler systems of exclusion as the basis of the methodology for how we do this work. As we consider decentering academic research and think about these power dynamics, we cannot

forget the origin story of the field we work in as having been an elite practice.[2] Professional and academic oral history in the United States is largely believed to have begun as an elite endeavor that valued the experiences of wealthy and mostly white intellectuals. In 1948, Allan Nevins created Columbia University's Center for Oral History, which at the time was recognized as the first oral history program to operate on an institutionalized basis in the United States. Nevins, a distinguished journalist, author, and history professor at Columbia, is renowned for his work as a business historian, his extensive documentation of the Civil War, and his biographies of figures such as Grover Cleveland (24th President of the United States), Hamilton Fish (16th Governor of New York), Henry Ford (American industrialist and business magnate), and John D. Rockefeller (American business magnate and philanthropist). All white, wealthy, and elite male figures of American history and enterprise who served as narrators for legacy-driven oral history projects.

The Oral History Association (OHA), the first national professional organization for oral historians, was founded in 1968 with journalist Louis M. Starr as its first president. Starr studied under Nevins as a graduate student and in 1958 became the director of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (now the Columbia Center for Oral History Research, CCOHR). The announcement of the establishment of the OHA was announced through a press release that defined oral history as "the recording, transcribing, and preservation of interviews with persons who have participated in important political, cultural, and economic developments in modern times for use by

[2] This is a narrative that is in part disproven through the research of Anna F. Kaplan on such oral history pioneers as Fisk University's Ophelia Settle Egypt who, like her contemporary Zora Neal Hurston, collected ex-slave narratives for the WPA in the 1920's.

historians, biographers, teachers, and students."[3] This definition narrowed the scope of oral histories to elite persons interested in influencing and contributing to academic knowledge, not social justice and definitely not for community engagement or service. Though not the first, Dan Kerr's 2016 article "Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather" created a lasting popular intervention in oral history's origin story to focus on the field's radical roots in the Civil Rights and labor movements.

However, one cannot deny that the founding fathers of the field's professional spaces centered the life experiences of wealthy and elite narrators. And neither Kerr's article on its own nor the other more radical uses of oral history that preceded it, have been enough to effect a lasting change in the way the best practices in the field at large are codified. We bring focus to the founding of professional oral history associations and academic oral history institutions in the United States because they are considered to be the stewards of standards and best practices for oral history work. If the professional institutions producing best practices were founded to document elite voices, what would prompt them to consider the needs of non-elite voices? Although change has happened, the shifts have been slow. For example, in 2022, the OHA adopted the "Guidelines for Social Justice Oral History Work", and the Columbia Center for Oral History Research released a new transcription style guide with updated considerations regarding transcribing dialects. Many oral historians have also created their own best practices when documenting the work of endangered communities and have centered

[3] "Oral Historians Organize Association." *History News* 22, no. 7 (1967): 144–144. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42646048.

their needs and unique experiences. Two oral historians whose work speaks to this include the founder of the UNC's Southern Oral History Program, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and Winona Wheeler, who has written extensively about considerations needed when documenting Indigenous/Native stories and scholarship.

Established best practices by professional institutions serve a helpful purpose in understanding the ethics and guidelines for oral history projects. However, they fall short of recognizing that a crucial part of this process is relational. Wheeler asks, to whom are we accountable when producing oral histories? What standards are we obligated to meet? Those of the community to which we belong or to the academic principles we have been trained and taught to follow? [4] This is a question that often arises for BIPOC practitioners, and it is certainly true for the writers of this article. As we navigate answers to these questions, we realize that the legacies and practices within the field of oral history don't always fit the communities we are interested in serving and advocating for. In response, our calls for the adoption of relational considerations including the recognition of the role of financial redress or compensation in oral history project budgets, have become more consistent.

This appears to even be the case in academia more broadly according to a new formation of progressive scholars committed to fighting for justice for all, especially those most vulnerable, like the Scholars for Social Justice who remind us that "while

[4] Wheeler, Winona. "Thoughts on the Responsibilities for Indigenous/Native Studies." *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 21: 97-104. https://cjns.brandonu.ca/wp-content/uploads/21-1-cjnsv21no1_pg97-104.pdf

many calls for reparations single out the state as the primary perpetrator of racial harm and thus also as the primary site for demanding redress, universities have also played a historical and ongoing role in perpetuating racial inequality."[5] While the academy and the varied institutions that contribute to the business of academia in this country, cannot be wholly responsible for all systems of redress, financial compensation, and reparations, they do have the power to instate public acknowledgment of the wrongdoing that exists throughout America's history and present. They also have the means to educate the public on the existence of deliberate institutional oppression and the history of structural racism.

Professor Crystal Baik defines a relational engagement in oral history as one that prioritizes "connections, affinities, and partnerships that make oral history possible, as well as the emergent relations and solidarities forged through oral history."[6] With the understanding that solidarities will arise within the documentation process, we argue that oral historians and even other academics should consider advocating against state-inflicted violence. *The Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence* defines state violence as "the use of legitimate governmental authority to cause unnecessary harm and suffering to groups, individuals, and states."[7] Being applied either broadly or narrowly to refer to events such as genocide, state terrorism, police brutality, state surveillance, and juridical violence. We use "state-inflicted" rather than the more

[5] "Reparations in Higher Education." Scholars For Social Justice, accessed Mar 8, 2025, www.scholarsforsocialjustice.com/projects/reparations-in-higher-education.

[6] Baik, Crystal Mun-hye. "From 'Best' to Situated and Relational: Notes toward a Decolonizing Praxis." *The Oral History Review* 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 3–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2026197.

[7] Renzetti, Claire M., and Jeffrey L. Edleson. *Encyclopedia of interpersonal violence*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2008.

commonly used term “state-sanctioned” to foreground the active participation of the state in the harm created.

Understanding Harm

Systemic or institutional racism is a form of racism embedded in the laws, regulations, policies, and practices existing throughout a whole society or organization, meaning they support an ongoing unwarranted advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on the perception of race, resulting in unequal opportunities or outcomes. One result of systemic racism in this country is a documented history of people of color being unpaid or underpaid for their labor, their knowledge and skills being taken for granted and appropriated for the monetary gain of others. Racism is responsible for much of the state-inflicted violence that has impacted people on American soil, such as slavery, immigration policies, police brutality, and the longstanding system of mass incarceration.

Immigration law in the U.S. often criminalizes BIPOC asylum seekers and refugees. A 2018 “zero-tolerance" policy allowed children to be separated from their parents and labeled criminals, human traffickers, and narcotics traffickers, thus making them subject to criminal prosecution. However, the Biden administration launched “Uniting for Ukraine” in April 2022, to admit 100,000 Ukrainians with kindness, understanding, and access to asylum proceedings.[8] The way we treat people of color immigrating to

[8] “Ukrainian Allies Resources - U.S. Committee for Refugees & Immigrants.” USCRI, April 15, 2024. https://refugees.org/take-action-old/resources-for-ukrainian-allies/#1646152691753-8c5990f9-e9d5.

America today has everything to do with the way Black people first came to this country in the 1600s. The transatlantic slave trade, a portion of the global slave trade responsible for kidnapping and conveying between ten and twelve million enslaved Africans to the Americas over two centuries, was banned through the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves on March 2, 1807. It created a social institution of race-based chattel slavery, which allowed human beings and their offspring to be considered personal property that could be bought, sold, given, inherited, and owned forever through the law. It reached its modern extreme in the Americas during European colonization, allowing for the enslaved to be tortured, beaten, hunted, lynched, and raped at the discretion of slave owners and other white citizens with impunity until the conclusion of the Civil War.

Policing in America, being an extension of that same system has led to the violence and brutality of police against Black people especially. An increase in the visibility of police violence due to advancing technology and social media led to nationwide protests in the summer of 2020. After the violent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, cities like Los Angeles, Dallas, Minneapolis, New York, Chicago, and Seattle all experienced similar unrest, growing with each newly uncovered instance of death due to police violence. Black and brown people exist in the U.S. in a very contested way in that they are often deemed problematic, disruptive, and unreliable by the police, the news, or the general public. Black people who speak up against police brutality are often bad-mouthed in the press and presented as malefactors even when they are the victims

of said violence themselves. As narrators in oral history, it is important not only that their testimony is taken seriously but also has the chance to advance a greater activism.

Those who survive the brutality of policing in America do not necessarily escape the violence of wrongful incarceration. According to The Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, mass incarceration does not affect all Americans equally. “Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men, and Latinos are 2.5 times as likely. For Black men in their thirties, about 1 in every 12 is in prison or jail on any given day.”[9] Following reconstruction, former Confederate states instituted Black Codes wherein vagrancy laws were a central element criminalizing men who were out of work or not working at a job whites recognized. Failure to pay a certain tax, or to comply with other laws, could also be construed as vagrancy for which these men could be fined or arrested and reinstated into defacto slavery as per the 13th Amendment, which reads “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

Latino and especially Black communities have long been subject to wildly disproportionate drug enforcement and sentencing practices since 1971 when President Nixon declared a “war on drugs” by dramatically increasing the size and presence of federal drug control agencies and pushing through measures such as mandatory sentencing and no-knock warrants. A top Nixon aide, John Ehrlichman, later admitted:

[9] “Racial Justice - End Mass Incarceration Now.” The Sentencing Project, March 8, 2024. https://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/racial-justice/.

“You want to know what this was really all about. The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did.”[10]

Compensation and Advocacy in Oral History

It is true that not all people who are born or find themselves in disadvantaged circumstances such as these, stay in those predicaments. Many successful people of color excel in numerous fields across this country, physically, educationally, and financially. Just because the color of one's skin or the place of their birth marks them as a part of a marginalized population, doesn’t mean they need compensation, either as a narrator or in the form of reparations. However, just because an individual doesn’t need the money, does not mean they do not deserve it or shouldn’t be entitled to some form of recompense for their time. People such as these, surviving and sometimes managing to even thrive after suffering racism, police brutality, wrongful incarceration, and the like, are often the subjects of oral history projects. Though none of these projects are perfect or provide the definitive answer, a few are rather successful in making efforts towards helping their narrators.

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[10] Baum, Dan. “Legalize It All: How to Win the War on Drugs.” *Harper’s Magazine*, 2016. https://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/.

For example, both monetary compensation and advocacy can be found in The After Violence Project. After Violence is a community-based archive and documentary project cultivating deeper understanding of the impacts of state-sanctioned violence on individuals, families, and communities. Their mission is to conduct research and build an archive of stories that shift narrative power to marginalized and oppressed communities to promote restorative and transformative justice. Since 2007 they have conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with people directly impacted by murder, police violence, in-custody deaths, mass incarceration, and the death penalty. The 2017 collaborative project, Life and Death in a Carceral State: Narratives of Loss and Survival, trained interviewers with lived experience to conduct interviews with their fellow community members, bringing unique insight to the work.[11]

The documentary *No Más Bebés* shares the story of a landmark event in reproductive justice that very few people have ever heard about.[12] During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a group of Mexican immigrant women brought a lawsuit against county doctors, the state, and the United States government for their forced sterilization while giving birth at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center. Filmmakers spent five years tracking down sterilized mothers and witnesses of the 1975 civil rights lawsuit, Madrigal v. Quilligan. Oral Historian and film producer Virginia Espino conducted the original

[11] "Communityarchive." After Violence Project. Accessed March 31, 2025. https://afterviolenceproject.org/.

[12] Tajima-Peña, Renee. "No Mas Bebes." No Mas Bebes, 2015. https://www.nomasbebesmovie.com/.

research on which the film is based and published it in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*.[13] While no monetary narrator compensation was provided to the narrators who shared their story for the documentary, the producers of the film have partnered with reproductive rights organizations such as California Latinas for Reproductive Justice and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health to host screenings of the film to generate debate and advocate for reproductive rights. For many of these events, the narrators who shared their stories for the film have been invited onstage to answer questions and share their perspectives of the film. In 2003, then Governor of California, Gray Davis, issued a brief official apology on behalf of the state for eugenics-based sterilization policies enforced between the early 1900s and the 1970s. Following the examples of Virginia and North Carolina, which both established funds to compensate survivors of eugenics-based sterilization programs, researchers and reporters suggested in 2016 that California pay reparations as well.

The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation was named for distinguished historian, educator, civil rights advocate, and Oklahoma native John Hope Franklin, whose father, Buck Colbert Franklin, bore witness to the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. The Center houses galleries, archives, a digital story-telling booth, documentary projects, conference space, and other facilities appropriate for a historical site of national significance.[14] The center sponsors the Tulsa Reparations Coalition, which was

[13] Ruiz, Vicki L. *Las Obreras, Chicana politics of work and family*. Los Angeles: UCLA, Chicano Studies Research Center, 2000.

[14] "John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation – Tulsa, OK." John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation from Tragedy to Triumph, 2007. https://www.jhfcenter.org/.

organized on April 7, 2001, in response to the Race Riot Report. The legal efforts of the coalition are documented in the film *Before They Die!*, a documentary that includes the oral histories of the living survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot.[15] In May of 2021, a reparations bill for Tulsa Race Massacre survivors was introduced in Congress. Where the claims of survivors and descendants are rejected because of statute-of-limitations restrictions, Rep. Hank Johnson's (D-GA) proposed bill, the Tulsa-Greenwood Massacre Claims Accountability Act, had it been passed, would have provided them access in the courts to seek restitution for one of the worst episodes of racial violence in U.S. history.[16]

Another example of restorative justice using oral history as advocacy work is "Un(re)solved." A major initiative and multiplatform investigation that draws upon more than two years of reporting, thousands of documents, and dozens of first-hand interviews, "Un(re)solved" tells the stories of lives cut short through racism. This touring installation and experience mixes art and technology with investigative journalism to educate visitors on the federal effort to investigate racist civil rights-era killings to right the wrongs of America's past. Narrated by award-winning journalist, author, and civil rights activist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, visitors experience a guided journey in which they learn about more than 150 people on the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act list. By saying the names of the victims, visitors access oral histories with family and

[15] Turner, Reggie. "Beforetheydie.Org." beforetheydie.org | A documentary about the Survivors of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre and their quest for justice, 2008. https://beforetheydie.org/.

[16] Congress.gov. "H.R.3466 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Tulsa-Greenwood Massacre Claims Accountability Act of 2021." November 1, 2022. https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3466.

friends of the victims, remembering the lives of their loved ones and the multi-generational impact of their untimely loss. The exhibit, along with a web interactive, podcast, curriculum, and the related Frontline documentary *American Reckoning*, were all created with support from Northeastern University's Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project and partnership with StoryCorps.[17]

Justice Through Reparations

As part of our work recording stories through oral history methods, we should also be advocating for justice, especially reparations. To determine how oral history can be a tool for reparations more broadly, it is first necessary to define reparations. For this article, reparations can be defined as the making of amends for a wrong done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged within a system of redress for egregious injustices. By this definition, the advocacy we recommend oral historians in positions like ours do is in line with the quest for reparations. In dealing with the instances of Black and brown people who have suffered state-inflicted violence in the United States, reparations would be any state-led act, financial, systemic, or otherwise, of helping those wronged. Some examples of such acts seen within the realm of oral history include the creation of truth commissions for transitional justice.

The International Center for Transitional Justice reminds us that "compensation—or the payment of money—is only one of many different types of material reparations. Other types include the restitution of civil and political rights; physical rehabilitation;

[17] Shogaolu, Tamara. "Un(Re)Solved: A Multiplatform Experience." Edited by FRONTLINE, *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 4 May 2021, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/unresolved/.

and granting access to land, housing, health care, or education. Reparations can also take the form of revealing the truth about the violations themselves and providing guarantees that they will not be repeated. Symbolic reparations—such as apologies, memorials, and commemorations—are other important reparative measures that can be more meaningful when conferred alongside material reparations."[18] This understanding recognizes oral history, and similar methodologies of storytelling, witnessing, and narrative practice as a tool that can be used to collect evidence for the testimony or truth-telling of harm. Because reparations in other countries often come from the truth and reconciliation process, we look at instances in which truth and reconciliation commissions have successfully led to reparative justice in the past. Countries like South Africa, Ireland, Canada, Perú, and Guatemala have all undergone their own truth and reconciliation councils for various events and serve as a starting ground on which Americans can hope to improve.

Having gathered these varied examples for her book, Priscilla B. Hayner says "Oral history will neither heal nor cure but offers subtle support to interviewee's efforts to recompose their sense of self and regenerate agency."[19] If TRC is supposed to be about mental and emotional healing, the reparations that may also result from the process should be considered a means of creating economic and financial recovery from injustice. In the case of South Africa, the TRC was expected "to forge social cohesion in

[18] "Reparations." Reparations | International Center for Transitional Justice. Accessed March 31, 2025. https://www.ictj.org/reparations.

[19] Hayner, Priscilla B., and Michael Kerns. *Unspeakable truths: Transitional justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*. Routledge, 2010.

a post-apartheid context racked with socio-political divisions, violence, traumatised individuals and communities, economic recession, and widespread poverty." Thus, knowing and accepting the truth of what happened to individuals and what was done by perpetrators was meant to aid in eradicating these various issues, decreasing violence, healing trauma, and eradicating poverty.

Even with their relative successes, the TRC model is not necessarily the best option for addressing America's specific acts of violence past and present, particularly because there is not yet a widespread consensus on what harms have been committed to whom. In Germany, for instance, the 1992 Commission of Inquiry for the Assessment of History and Consequences of the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) was set up by members of the German Parliament shortly after all archives of the GDR and SED were made available to scholars. The German government, parliament, and public all recognized ongoing social tensions and problems affecting the country and believed the commission was essential to unify Germany. That type of consensus was the buy-in necessary for the commission to be a success and for its recommendations of restorative justice to be accepted. This, much like the South Africa TRC, acts as a guide and proof of concept from which we as oral historians can begin to activate ourselves beyond the normal bounds of our project focus and look towards how we can use the truth of our narrators' stories to advocate for restorative justice on their behalf.

The valuable information provided by the TRC process, much like the oral history interview, provides an explanation of the harm done as well as context for its financial

impact on the lives and livelihoods of narrators. According to Robinson-Sweet, nobody can "logically" argue that the American legacy of racial violence against Black Americans, for example, is any "less 'worthy' of the investigation and recommendations of a truth and reconciliation commission than those human rights crimes committed by Argentina, Chile, South Africa, or Canada." She argues that "archives play an essential role in establishing claims for reparations," and if that is the case, archivists and all those who do this work of recording and preserving memory, should also be playing an essential role in advancing those claims.[20]

Where lawyers and law enforcement officials spend their days in search of hard evidence and tangible proof of crimes, oral historians and other such memory workers know how to put the individual story into the greater societal context. Rev. Kevin R. Johnson from Dare to Imagine Church in Philadelphia, PA preached in a 2022 sermon that "to bear witness is not just to report what you saw but to give evidence of what you saw." But how do we define testimony and evidence as they relate to the idea of truth and reconciliation? Though oral history testimony can be collected to find truths, make reconciliations, correct the public record, hold criminals accountable, and sometimes pay reparations, there are times when oral history testimony itself is insufficient towards these goals. Times when witnesses are not trusted or valued enough, times when the inherent power differential in an interview setting may lead to inaccuracies, as in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives. Often used as an early example of oral history at work in the margins, the collection "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives

[20] Robinson-Sweet, Anna. "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists." *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (March 2018): 23–37. https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.23.

from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938" archived in the Library of Congress, while flawed, represents a New Deal era zenith of narrative collecting.[21]

There are differences between judicial testimony and oral history. On its own, no oral history project can serve the function of a true TRC because an interpersonal exchange is not the same as a public reckoning. "But in the absence of such a reckoning," the right oral history project "could serve as a placeholder—an initial first step towards the formal public repair that we hope is one day coming."[22] In the case of Zora Neale Hurston's interviews with Cudjo Lewis, she says in her preface "The quotations from the works of travelers in Dahomey are set down, not to make this appear a thoroughly documented biography, but to emphasize his remarkable memory." And her purpose in writing the book is to "set down essential truth rather than fact of detail, which is so often misleading."[23] As Portelli will tell you: frankly, the "facts" aren't always what they're cracked up to be and at the end of the day, America has and will likely continue to abstain from any truth and reconciliation for as long as possible. This is because the state governs through oppression and violence in the knowledge that it will never be called to account for that violence. It is a certainty that the existence of the archives, our oral history projects and their products all have the power to preclude if we insist upon it. We as oral historians, like the archivists Robinson-Sweet describes, have to be the

[21] "'No'm, I Aint Tellin' No Lies. It De Gospel Truf': Historical Memory and the Slave Narrative Collection." The Activist History Review, February 13, 2020. https://activisthistory.com/2020/02/13/nom-i-aint-tellin-no-lies-it-de-gospel-truf-historical-memory-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

[22] García, Fanny Julissa, and Nara Milanich. "Money Talks: Narrator Compensation in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 50, no. 2 (July 3, 2023): 148–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2023.2230243.

[23] Hurston, Zora Neale, Deborah G. Plant, and Robin Miles. *Barracoon: The story of the last "black cargo."* New York: Harper Collins, 2018.

intermediaries between the power of our records and the control of the state. In describing the archives' connection to power, Robinson-Sweet poignantly quotes South African archivist Verne Harris as saying, “Archivists, whether they realize it or not, are at once the objects and instruments of political pressure.”[24] A political pressure that, along with the example of our willingness to provide a token of narrator compensation, may go a long way towards finally bringing about justice and reparations.

For this article, however, reparation goes beyond monetary payouts to include acknowledgment and accountability for wrongs committed by any person, institution, or state. For Black Americans in the United States, the case for reparations has been made in connection to their enslavement and for the full impact of laws and policies that intentionally excluded them from human and civic rights and exposed them to horrific violence inflicted to exclude and exterminate. There are many current calls for reparations and/or restitution in the political sphere, including H.R. 40, introduced to Congress by Rep. Ayanna Pressley in January of 2025, to create a commission on reparations for Black Americans modeled on the process that Japanese Americans went through to receive reparations for being imprisoned during World War II.[25]

The Call To Action

But what can we as ordinary citizens, academics, and particularly oral historians, do? Narrator compensation is a small way we can begin the process of making equity and

[24] Robinson-Sweet, “Truth and Reconciliation,” 23.

[25] Congress.gov. "H.R.40 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act." January 3, 2025. https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/40.

justice important tenets of oral history work. Defined as being something, typically money, awarded to someone as a recompense for loss, injury, or suffering; compensation is something that counterbalances or makes up for an undesirable or unwelcome state of affairs. In this case—that of conducting oral history interviews with the Black and brown people who have survived many of the worst offenses this country has inflicted upon people within its borders—the unwelcome state of affairs is reliving the memories of state-sanctioned violence. As just two working oral historians, we are not claiming the right to decide who gets how much and for what reason, however, we believe it's our responsibility, as women of color working in communities where we see the effects of state-inflicted violence, to advocate compensation for narrators. There doesn't need to be a verbal or visible demand for compensation for us to know it is the moral and ethical thing to do.

The question of "how much is enough?" shouldn't be the hang-up that halts the process of compensating narrators or budgeting for a project. "Exchanging money within the context of oral history lays bare thorny questions about power, value, consent, ownership, and who benefits from storytelling," and "goes to the heart of political and ethical dilemmas with which the field of oral history has long grappled."[26] When considering what amount of payment could make a difference in our narrators' lives, we should remember that for those living below the poverty line, those facing the costs of relocating or restarting their lives, every dollar counts and can be put to good use. There doesn't need to be a demand for something to be the correct moral and ethical choice.

[26] García, "Money Talks," 148.

That being said, no amount of money can be “enough" because no oral historian can be tasked with the valuation of someone’s life story. We are not attempting to buy narrators or their stories, rather we are suggesting an olive branch – an acknowledgement that we see the impact of state-inflicted violence, and that we will no longer ignore it.

In our respective roles, we each handle paying for narrator compensation differently depending on the circumstances of each project. Garcia calls this “situated compensation.” We are not saying we need to decide who gets how much for what reason, we are just responsible for advocating that compensation for narrators comes from somewhere. It does not have to necessarily be in the form of cash or constitute a direct and contractual payment for labor. Instead, this could be considered as a gift or token of appreciation, potentially in the form of a physical gift, a meal, a gift card, a donation, and, in the case of those living in New York City, even a MetroCard could be useful. Any amount of giving could potentially make a difference in the lives of those harmed by state-inflicted violence. And so, we extend this expectation of narrator compensation to all oral historians who, like ourselves, are in a position where they do not have to also fundraise for their own salaries or fees and can do so for their narrators instead.

While there has not been an uproar of narrators demanding payment to be interviewed, that does not make it unimportant or something unworthy of consideration. And while we cannot be certain that all narrators want to be compensated for their time and the effort of relaying their experiences and memories, we can choose not to stand within the

long history of women or Black and brown people who have been under-compensated for their labor. We would suggest that the relevance of the compensation comes not from the specific amount so much as the gesture of goodwill and culturally understood exchange. In her relationship building with Cudjo Lewis, Zora Neale Hurston, did not attempt to pay him for his story, nor did she merely bring gifts in exchange for his time, but she gave him her time as well, coming one Saturday to help him clean the church for Sunday's services and run errands in Mobile.[27]

While it is true that in journalism it is considered unethical to pay the subjects who are portrayed, profiled, or quoted, some journalists can be activists. Journalists can become active in the source's life and sometimes advocate for the source. Again, compensation does not have to be monetary. In the case of journalism, reporters fear that paying for quotes can lead to less integrity, such as in the case of tabloids that suffer from embellishment, lies, and sensational stories as subjects value funds more than accuracy. According to The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, paying sources for information, known as checkbook journalism, undermines journalistic independence and integrity and threatens the accuracy of the information that is purchased.[28] Other unintended consequences of paying narrators could be creating a trend of narrators asking for money several times. This can happen but it's okay.

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[27] Hurston, *Barracoon*, 51.

[28] Farrell, Mike. "SPJ Ethics Committee Position Papers - Society of Professional Journalists." *Society of Professional Journalists - Improving and Protecting Journalism since 1909*, SPJ Ethics Committee, https://www.spj.org/ethics-papers-cbj.asp.

Understanding this speaks to the validity of our claim as oral historians that, again, narrator compensation is not meant to be payment for the actual monetary value or worth of an interview. We are not paying narrators for their information and we're not suggesting there's a formula for determining how much one narrator may be owed over another. Furthermore, no embellishments of the truth can increase the value of the information. However, even though it's not for sale, story is a commodity whether we're the ones to put a price on it or not. "The argument that paying narrators amounts to buying someone's story contradicts an axiom of oral history practice: the idea of the cocreated narrative."[29] Thus, the compensation we advocate for is about the relationship exchange rather than ownership and is largely symbolic. In the case of Zora Neale Hurston writing *Barracoon*, Kossola trusted Hurston because, as Deborah G. Plant describes, "over a period of three months, Hurston visited with Kossola. She brought Georgia peaches, Virginia hams, late-summer watermelons, and Bee Brand insect powder. The offerings were as much a currency to facilitate their blossoming friendship as a means to encourage Kossola's reminiscences."[30]

This act of gift-giving is not a payment for Kossola's story. Other reporters had come and gone to interview him and write his story for their papers, paying him the money he desperately needed. But Hurston's actions are different because she has become invested in his life and well-being. As Marcel Mauss explains in his anthropological treatise on gift-giving, The Gift, "to make a gift of something to someone is to make a

[29] Garcia, "Money Talks," 160.

[30] Hurston, *Barracoon*, xiv.

present of some part of oneself."[31] Therefore the gift of the interview exchange is "at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond."[32]

While it may be the case that not every narrator requires or even wants to be compensated for their story or their time, that doesn't mean their time, their labor, and their interview doesn't have value. Thus a gesture of goodwill in the interviewing process, whether monetary or not, would never go amiss. In the cases of those who have or are currently experiencing state-inflicted or sanctioned violence or other forms of harm, we should not overlook the burden and labor of sharing these stories. So often, these painful stories are coming from individuals who are likely still suffering through the aftereffects, which can impact not only their quality of life but also their potential earnings. Given what we already know of the gender and racial pay gap in this country, it is no great leap to assume that any form of compensation could stand to improve existing situations of financial precarity in some small way and, at the very least, serve as a means of helping to build rapport by recognizing value.

You can't just pay people for their stories, the same way you can't just pay for their lives. And so when the narrator receives compensation "it is not for handing over a story but

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[31] Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. 12

[32] Mauss, The Gift, 59.

rather for creating one—it is for the "act of speech" rather than its "outcome."[33] When we consider how a particular project can serve the narrators, we divert to compensation because we live in a capitalist society where we think about numbers and equate time with money. The world of academia is not separate from this, the universities we belong to, the journals we contribute to, and the books we publish are all selling something and are part of the for-profit business model.

If it wasn't necessary before, why should this practice be instituted now? Because there has been a paradigm shift since 2020 with all of the statements produced by corporations and universities about the death of George Floyd and the need for social justice. Oral history is primed for the same paradigm shift in the way we go about budgeting for oral history projects. We can not continue to do it according to the practices developed by white people. It does not work for Black and brown people and funding needs to catch up to the changes of oral history. These changes are that more and more Black and brown people are moving into the academic field to record their own histories.

When it comes to budgeting and project design, how do you approach the compensation of narrators? In the same way that you approach any other budgetary item. In your project blueprint, you estimate not just the number of narrators you aspire to interview, but oftentimes, an exact list of the individuals you are hoping will consent to participate. With this in mind, it should not be particularly difficult to think of an

[33] Garcia, "Money Talks," 160.

appropriate form of compensation for your specific project and multiply that by the number of narrators you are expecting to place narrator payment in the context of oral history funding in total. In this way, everyone who contributes to the success of a project gets paid or benefits in some way, including the oral historians and the institutions they represent, or the funders who supply grant money.

Narrators in the projects Funderburk and Garcia work on are eager to share their stories because they see the value in the preservation of their life histories and experiences. All of the narrators in these projects are Black and brown and all of them have experienced some form of state-inflicted violence that is enabled by racism and socioeconomic exclusionary practices. We want to continue to document their experiences and we have chosen oral history as the method with which to do so. However, we feel strongly that the professional organizations dedicated to establishing best practices for oral history have failed to accommodate the needs of communities endangered by institutionalized racism and state-inflicted violence. Therefore, we must respond to these needs now. Simply citing journalistic ethics as a reason for not incorporating compensation in oral history project budgets is not enough. Journalism functions under a different code of ethics because their practice of collecting data and evidence is different from oral history. The specific code of ethics for journalists says, “be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news.”[34]

None of the narrators we have worked with have asked for money and they are certainly not contributing their stories because they believe it is news. Many of them often ask us

[34] Farrell, “SPJ Ethics Committee Position Papers.”

incredulously “why do you want to hear *my* story? What is so important about it?” To which we often also reply, “everything is important about it, everything, because it is yours and that is enough.” Journalists seek truth, oral historians seek all that is remembered, whether true or not. Oral historians have also been taught to be curious about how and why historical facts are remembered and why. We must also be curious about how and why oral history best practices have not more carefully considered the socioeconomic and mental wellbeing of the narrators we work with. Especially if we continue to be curious about historical moments of crisis and trauma. Another journalism ethic is to do no harm. Perhaps oral history practitioners should distinguish themselves not just for not causing harm but also for standing up for practices such as reparations, which aim to acknowledge the harm done.

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