NANO
NEW AMERICAN NOTES ONLINE

Issue 5: Digital Humanities, Public Humanities

July 2014

Oral History and Open Access: Fulfilling the Promise of Democratizing Knowledge

by Elise Chenier

Elise Chenier is a historian at Simon Fraser University and the creator of the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimonies alotarchives.org and Interracial Intimacies, a teaching tool and archives, at interracialintimacies.org.

Contact: echenier@gmail.com

https://nanocrit.com/issues/issue5/oral-history-and-open-access-fulfilling-promise-democratizing-knowledge

---

Abstract: This article aims to connect activist-oriented and community-based practices of oral history and digital humanities so that accessibility and content creation are emphasized. Despite almost thirty years of lesbian oral history data collection in Canada and the United States, my research has identified two major obstacles to the long-term preservation of this valuable historical data: the high cost of preservation and the failure of interviewers to plan for the long-term preservation of their material. By launching an active collection strategy and reaching out to researchers who possess un-archived collections, and by assuming the costs of digitization, storage and dissemination, The Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony can provide a solution to both problems.

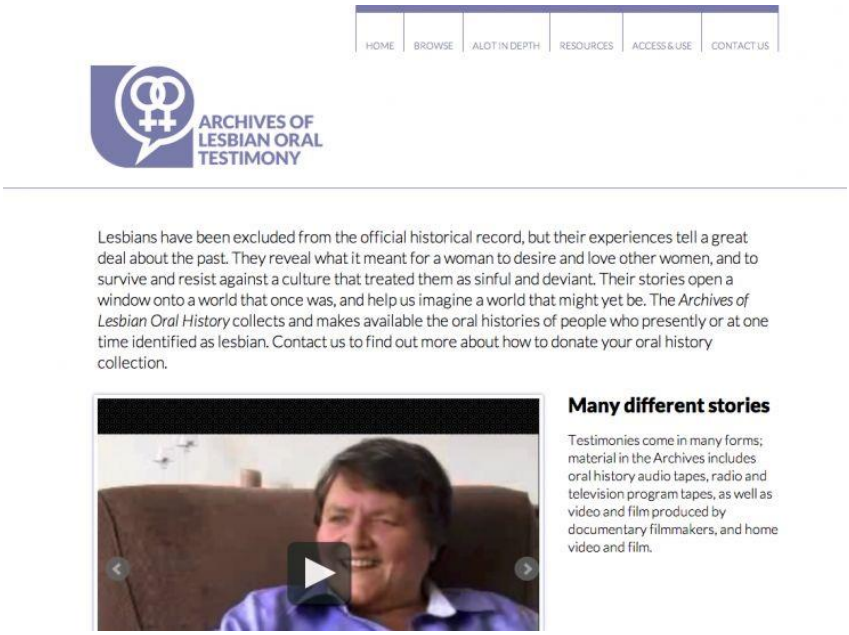
Keywords: digital humanities, culture, women's studies, ethnography, lgbt studies, oral history

---

Copyright Information: *NANO: New American Notes Online* by https://nanocrit.com is licensed under a Creative CommonsAttribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

The digital humanities and the open access movement that followed might well be the natural offspring of the 1970s oral history movement. Oral history has existed as long as humans have spoken, but here I am referring specifically to the activist oriented, community-based practice of oral history that emerged in the early 1970s. The oral history movement aimed to counter formal, elite knowledge with organic knowledge—to break through the walls of academe and the scholarly world, to legitimate and create a place and space for the knowledge that arises from everyday experience. In so doing, the oral history movement democratized knowledge and empowered citizens. The relationship oral history shares with digital humanities is obvious: both make "data" accessible to broad publics, both encourage and facilitate people to become "content creators," not passive consumers, and both regard these practices as having transformative potential.

The Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (A LOT) is an online digital archive of lesbian oral/aural testimonies housed at the Simon Fraser University Library. A LOT began as a simple preservation project. Many people who interviewed women in the 1980s and 1990s about their experiences as lesbians had not archived their analog tapes. I had access to a lab and funding that would allow me to convert analog tapes to .wav (digital sound) files, and it was this modest task I set out to do in 2010. The deeper I read into the literature on digital humanities, however, the more complex and exciting the project became. In this note I present the ideas that have shaped my thinking about building this archives, the concept for the archives that has evolved, and our overall objectives.



A LOT Screenshot Image

Oral interviewing is a popular research method in the social sciences, yet interviews are rarely archived, and even when they are, they can be difficult for others to locate and access. Interviews generate rich and valuable research material but have limited benefit if they are not preserved and accessible. A LOT aims to develop an active collection strategy, and to collaborate with existing archives and researchers, to make interviews with and about lesbians available for use by scholars and non-scholars in an open access online archive. The Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony will provide access to a rich database of original material not available elsewhere, and will facilitate research in oral interviewing methodologies, in women's history and the history of sexuality, in communication and memory studies, and in lesbian, women's, and queer studies. It will, we hope, benefit educators and student researchers at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Because the archive also makes this data available to those who originally shared it with researchers, it also serves wider community interests (Snider).

Over the past three decades, researchers have collected thousands of hours of data, but little has been donated to publicly accessible archives or libraries (Chenier). Part of the reason is because oral interviewers often fail to make plans to archive their oral research data. Furthermore, most lesbian and gay archives tend to focus on gay male material, thus lesbian researchers do not always see those archives as the best place to preserve their data (Nestle). Hours and hours of research material about a relatively hidden area of historical experience is at risk of being lost forever, and because many of the narrators have died, there is little possibility of reclaiming these stories a second time. That which has been preserved, such as Becki Ross' tapes from her research on Toronto's 1970s lesbian community now at the University of Ottawa, is not easily accessible. Furthermore, with the exception of the high-profile Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York, collections of interviews for lesbian-focused research projects are known only to a small group of specialists and are almost completely out of reach of the general public.

Despite almost thirty years of lesbian oral history data collection in Canada and the United States, my research has identified two major obstacles to the long-term preservation of this valuable historical data: the high cost of preservation and the failure of interviewers to plan for the long-term preservation of their material. By launching an active collection strategy and reaching out to researchers who possess un-archived collections, and by assuming the costs of digitization, storage and dissemination, The Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony can provide a solution to both problems.

As a digital, open access archive, A LOT can reach a much wider audience than a traditional archive. Physical distance can be a significant barrier between researcher and public, and between researcher and material in traditional archives; A LOT's collection will be available anywhere there is internet access and to those who know how to navigate the web—and who have access to privacy, should they need it, to view the site. Third, online archives can facilitate access for people with disabilities. There is no requirement to travel to inaccessible buildings, and tools are available to assist those with vision and hearing impairments. The sound archive will be accessible to the blind, and transcripts to the deaf. Partnering with an institutional library

allows us to leverage the software and systems already in use at the library for a wide variety of similar digital collections. The underlying digital content management platform provides much of the desired discovery functionality (such as search and browse). It is also based on widely used metadata standards such as Dublin Core. The project will also develop extensive and specialized description metadata that expressly reflects the key topics and concepts represented by the A LOT content. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that online archives have barriers, too. Users must have access to an internet connection, basic knowledge of how the web is used, and in some cases, the privacy needed to explore a topic still considered taboo.

The 1993 award-winning Canadian documentary film *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* demonstrated the value of lesbian oral testimonies to multiple audiences. Filmmakers Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie used oral testimonies to reveal histories of lesbianoppression and survival in postwar Canada. It has been screenedinternationally, is used by scholars for research purposes, and is used in educational curricula to thepresent day. Similarly the recent "It Gets Better" campaigninvited everyday people to share stories of surviving homophobia, and post them online as a way tocounter depression and suicide that resulted from queer oppression. Like *Forbidden Love, "*It Gets Better" demonstrates how oral testimonies of sexually marginalized peoples contribute to buildingcommunity and improving the quality of life for everyday people. Asan online archive that makes stories of everyday lesbian experience and survival widely available, A LOT serves similar purposes for scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. In a 2010 survey distributed principally through academic email networks, with 365 respondents evenly distributed across all 18+ age categories, more than half indicated that they would use the website for general interest, and almost fifty percent indicated they would use the site for doctoral research and curriculum development. It also showed that this research tool would attract people who have never before used archives or oral interview data. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that having this material accessible online is very important

Putting oral narratives online does more than create a new home for old materials. When digital humanities first emerged it was called "humanities computing" and seen largely as a new tool to support humanities scholars existing research practices. As technology expanded and became more essential to the research process, "computational technology has become the very condition of possibility required in order to think about many of the questions raised in the humanities today" (Berry 3). As Burton, Onderdonk, and Appleford point out, new technologies' collaborative promise means that digital humanists "are uniquely positioned to liberate information, making it available to all citizens and creating a culture of what is coming to be known as ubiquitous learning," but, it's success depends on teams of skilled curators (197). Curating research material online has led to the blurring of disciplinary lines–for example, where in the past historians were dependent upon, but produced scholarship independent of, archivists, such separations are no longer desirable. Collaboration across the disciplines is necessary, and is changing the nature of our fields of study.

The ability to work across various platforms and with more diverse materials has also led to the rapid emergence of new research methods and approaches. According to N. Kathryn Hayles, open access databases such as the one used by A LOT "shifts the emphasis from argumentation…to data elements" (55). This shift has significant implications. Past practices of restricting access to artifacts and primary sources (so that one might lay sole scholarly claim to them) are being challenged by "web dissemination mechanisms [that] allow for increased diversity of interpretation and richness of insights" (Hayles 55). A LOT contributes to this growing trend in a number of ways. For example, currently, most studies of lesbian experience are local, and focus on either a rural or urban region. This is because the researcher is limited to collecting data within a geographic area that she can reasonably travel in order to complete the research. A searchable database will allow researchers to undertake comparative studies, and to analyze a much wider range of data than ever before possible. It will allow for different, more narrowly focused questions than conventional data collection methods can answer. Putting oral testimonies online will also facilitate collaborative research projects among scholars in different disciplines, and between students in different geographical locations. Finally, it will also encourage studies beyond the social sciences, where such data is most commonly employed, in fields such as performance studies, psychology, health studies, and documentary film production.

Over the past five years scholars, administrators, and government bodies alike have expressed serious concerns about the fact that private, for-profit companies own more and more of the data that scholars produce. Critics have argued that publicly funded research should be public, not private, knowledge. An especially powerful example of the commercialization and monetization of records is lesbian and gay periodicals published from the 1950s through to the present day. Some of these materials were produced by volunteer labor as part of a political commitment to build gay community and advance gay rights, yet currently these are only accessible with a costly subscription to a digital content provider. The commodification of culture undermines democratic society and takes history out of the hands of those who made it. Using institutional resources and public funds to disseminate lesbian oral testimonies in an open access environment ensures that oral testimony data collection benefits the largest possible audience. In this way, digital humanities and open access can help current and future social scientists conducting oral interview work on lesbian topics meet new requirements to archive publicly funded research data.

A LOT and similar archives can also facilitate collaborations with community organizations. Open access makes "ownership" almost irrelevant; however, both data management and responsible institutional commitment to the records will be significant responsibilities. This allows A LOT to be unique in the world of archives in that we will work in concert, not competition, with existing archives, with established and emerging scholars, and with other generators and collectors of oral testimonies. Our objective to develop new ideas for thinking about how to transition oral testimony collections from bricks-and-mortar to online archives includes acting as a research hub rather than just an owner of research materials. As a non-proprietary collaborative project we hope to bridge the resource gap between community and small archives by utilizing Simon Fraser University's resources and expertise.

The digital environment also provides solutions to long-standing issues that trouble oral historians. First, as scholar Michael Frisch has argued, in traditional archives researchers rarely listen to original records, preferring instead the written transcript (107). Yet it is aural history, that is, original sound recordings, that bring material alive and add rich layers of meaning to the text (Thomson). The internet allows us to put the "aural" back in oral history. Now, meanings can be gleaned not just in word, but in tone, gesture, and affect, thus facilitating new research methods.

Another problem we must address is that copyright ownership is unclear in the area of oral testimony data. Most researchers request that interviewees sign over their rights to the researcher in order that they be able to proceed with publication of the research, but as Dougherty and Simpson point out, asking informants to relinquish rights violates the principle of empowerment. Concern about the use of creative and intellectual property once put online has led to an innovative solution: creative commons licensing. It allows the creator to indicate the ways their material can be used by others. Some oral historians have adopted this tool as a way to guard the interests of both interviewer and interviewee, and A LOT will use the same system, thus ensuring that both the rights and interests of all parties are fully protected.

Anonymity is another concern. Individuals who offer their oral testimonies often request it. This creates an additional barrier in traditional archival settings since these records can only be accessed under special conditions. Digital technology provides editing tools that can assist in making testimonies anonymous, thus increasing access to the data. Permission and donation forms completed by narrators and researchers will determine the level of public access assigned to testimonies. When restricted access is requested, online archives can use password-protection in place of bricks-and-mortar archives' locked cabinets.

The same digital technology will allow researchers to conduct keyword data searches. This will facilitate the emergence of new research questions. For example, questions of identity are often the focus of scholarly interest concerning lesbian experience. In the past, listening to hours and hours of recorded conversation, or reading pages and pages of transcript in the occasional instances that they are available, was impossible. Both aural and transcribed records can be searched by keyword allowing for work that compares much larger data sets.

Just as the web provides new solutions, it generates new problems. While on the one hand oral history has long been about open access, posting interviews on the web has created new anxieties about privacy. In the past, traditional archives limited access to people keenly interested in, and presumably sympathetic to, the content of an interview and the topic of discussion. Usually only those with some training in and sensitivity toward the oral interview process would seek this material out. Putting interviews online changes this dramatically. Now, anyone can access these narratives. While few will, it nevertheless may leave both interviewee and interviewer feeling exposed and vulnerable. Moreover, a heightened sense of concern about internet privacy means that even putting materials behind a firewall does little to dissipate real concerns about having the most intimate and private aspects of one's life accessible to anyone who stumbles upon it.

Oral historians are the leading thinkers around issues concerning ethical use of research data. Since the 1970s they have led the way in liberatory and progressive research methods that challenge traditional structures of knowledge. They seem natural allies of the open access movement, yet they err on the side of caution when it comes to privacy protection. This is because the oral historian's practice includes deep reflection on their relationships with informants. They give careful consideration to the narrator's role in the production of research. Because oral historians are interested in empowering narrators, they want to ensure that narrators have decision-making power over what happens to their stories. From a legal standpoint, researchers who obtain a consent form from their narrators own copyright of the interview, but in practice few, if any, would share their material with others without the narrator's consent. On the matter of the ethics of data dissemination, people working in other areas of digital humanities could learn a great deal from the oral history community. Questions about the role of participants in data collection are only now just emerging in other research fields. They would benefit from the rich literature in oral history research. A LOT's operating model is based on ethical practices that preceded the digital revolution. Ironically, the digital archives are resurrecting "the closet" that oral history so successfully helped to dismantle. Sharing your story with a community group or researcher, even when it was to be donated to a bricks-and-mortar archive, seemed a low risk activity. The widespread access the internet allows makes these stories more accessible, but conversely, it makes researchers and informants alike uneasy about the way these interviews might be used.

In terms of the potential problems of oral history and the digital revolution, Ron Grele recently has stated that "the future does not look bright. The only interviews that will be placed online will be very, very 'safe' or innocuous. We will soon be back to vanity interviews of movers and shakers." Here, Grele is referring to the first university-based oral history program, established by Allan Nevins in 1948 at Columbia University in New York City. Its earliest interview subjects were elites chosen largely on the basis that they might become financial donors. Interviews produced under these conditions may have been interesting, but were a far cry from critical history (Sharpless).

Grele is right. Unless we solve the privacy problem that open access creates, the democratic and transformative potential in online oral/aural history archives will be lost. The oral history community tends to follow best practices that evolve out of practitioners' experience, but best practices have yet to emerge on this vexing question. It will be through traditional modes of collaborative consultation that we will resolve this very human problem, and undoubtedly digital technologies will provide us with a unique set of tools to implement the creative solutions the situation demands.

Works Cited

Berry, David M. *Understanding Digital Humanities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.

Bolick, Cheryl Mason. “Digital Archives: Democratizing the Doing of History.” *International Journal of Social Education* 21.1 (2006): 122–134. Print.

Burton, Orville Vernon, James Onderdonk, and Simon J. Appleford. “History: The Role of Technology in the Democratization of Learning.” *Ubiquitous Learning*. Eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. 197–205. Print.

Chenier, Elise. “Hidden from Historians: Preserving Lesbian Oral History in Canada.” *Archivaria* 68 (2009): 247–270. Print.

Cohen, Daniel J, and Roy Rosenzweig. *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006. Print.

Dougherty, Jack, and Candace Simpson. “Who Owns Oral History? A Creative Commons Solution.” *Oral History in the Digital Age*. Eds. D. Boyd et al. Institute of Library and Museum Services. 2012: n. pag. Web. 10 July 2013.

Fernie, Lynne, and Ann Weissman. *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*. National Film Board of Canada, 1992. VHS.

Frisch, Michael. “Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-documentary Sensibility.” *The Oral History Reader*. Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. Routledge, 2006. 102-114. Print.

Grele, Ron. “The future does not look bright.” Message to Rob Perks. 16 Aug. 2013. E-mail.

Hayles, N. Katherine. “How We Think: Transforming Power and Digital Technologies.” *Understanding Digital Humanities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 42–66. Print.

Haythornthwaite, Caroline. “Participatory Transformations.” *Ubiquitous Learning*. Eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. 31–48. Print.

High, Steven. “Telling Stories: A Reflection on Oral History and New Media.” *Oral History Society Journal* 38.1 (2010): 101-112. Print.

Mul, Jos de. *Cyberspace Odyssey: Towards a Virtual Ontology and Anthropology*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. Print.

Nestle, Joan. “The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York.” *Feminist Review* 34 (1990: 86–93). Print.

Rosenzweig, Roy. *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.

Ross, Becki. *The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995. Print.

Sharpless, Rebecca. “The History of Oral History.” *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*. Eds. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless. Lanham, MD: AltaMira P, 2007. 86–93. Print.

Snider, Lisa. *Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (A LOT) Survey Report*. Burnaby, B.C: Simon Fraser UP, 2011. Print.

Soren, Barbara J, and Nathalie Lemelin. “‘Cyberpals!/Les Cybercopains!’: A Look at Online Museum Visitor Experiences.” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 47.1 (2004): 55–83. Print.

Svensson, Patrik. “The Landscape of Digital Humanities.” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 4.1 (2010): n. pag. Web. 22 Jan. 2012.

Thomas, William. “Democratizing History.” George Bush Presidential Library, Texas: n. pag., 1999. Web. July 20, 2013.

Thomson, Alistair. “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History.” *Oral History Review* 34.1 (2007): 49–70. *Highwire 2.0*. Web. 24 Jan. 2012.

Image

“Homepage.” *alotarchives.org*. Archives of Lesbian Oral History. Screenshot. 6 July 2014.