

Citing Oral Histories in Literacy Studies

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KEYWORDS

oral history; inclusive citation praxis; Great Divide; homelessness; narratives of resiliency

In 2012, a 32-year-old woman named Jazz was only months away from graduating from St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Before matriculating at “St. Kate’s,” Jazz experienced sudden immersion in whiteness when she moved from Chicago to Minnesota as a young girl. Then, as a young woman, she faced predatory loans and non-accredited education options, housing instability, homelessness, addiction, single motherhood, and obstruction from the education system. Her path back into that system, despite the obstacles named here, required overcoming debt, non-transferable credits, and, once she matriculated, ignorance from her peers about poverty, Blackness, and homelessness. Jazz’s experiences required literacy of and navigation through some of the most complex and problematic systems in the United States. Her participation in an oral history project helps others see the gaps in these systems, the ways that people overcome them, and how various forms of literacy operate within the systems that she navigates.

Jazz donated her oral history interview to the St. Catherine University (SCU) Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project, one of many collaborations that document the perspectives and knowledge of people who have been historically excluded from academic discourse and historical record. Literacy scholars make remarkable contributions to these forms of collaborations by conducting interviews to learn more about how writing and literacy function outside of academia as much as within. Oral histories are particularly important in these efforts because they are recorded with the intent to archive in public record voices that are historically excluded. However, despite the hundreds of oral history projects that do exactly this, the use of these recordings as *sources* is rare among literacy scholars. Searching the archives in a sample of literacy journals for articles with the phrase “oral history” and “oral histories” published in the last five years yields only eight results: authors in two of these eight articles use existing oral histories as a source, and authors in six of the eight articles record new oral histories but do not make the narratives available to the reader. These numbers suggest that literacy scholars as a whole are not considering oral histories as a valuable source for their research and the research of others. I note these practices not as a critique of scholars for not using and/or not making available oral histories, but as an opportunity to expand how citation of oral histories can enrich and dimensionalize inclusion efforts in the field.

More deliberate citation of oral histories would support methods and approaches that undermine the “Great Divide” between oral and written language that continues to haunt literacy discourse. I situate this exploration as continuing Amy Wan’s focus on how paying attention to “researcher

positionality” can be “used alongside antiracist and decolonial approaches to literacy studies” (109), a positionality that is in relationship with what she calls “the growing awareness of citation politics” (117). After summarizing some of the unique qualities of oral histories that make them particularly helpful to undermining the “Great Divide,” I present in more depth the data showing how oral histories are used in a sample of literacy journals. I then explore Jazz’s oral history narrative as a case study that shows how oral histories offer forms of knowledge that can enrich literacy research.¹ The primary goal of this article is to suggest that more intentional use of oral histories as primary resources could enrich ongoing efforts of inclusion among literacy journals. In other words, I propose that Wan’s observation of the “growing expectation for a more critical approach to who we cite as literacy scholars” (117) might apply not only to *who* we cite but also to *what*.²

WHY CITE ORAL HISTORIES?

Before showing in detail how oral history is being used in a sample of literacy discourse, I suggest why it is important to do so. Scholars within this field and in so many cousin disciplines use a variety of oral forms—not at all limited to interviewing—to study composition and literacy. For example, Elias Dominguez Barajas’s study on the rhetorical use of audience engagement uses an oral performance given in a family setting (148), and Warren Cariou explores what he calls “life-telling,” an oral form applicable to all communities but particularly to Indigenous “artists, knowledge-keepers, and teachers” (314). Even within interviewing techniques, scholars use a range of approaches. Kathryn Roulston points out that there are as many approaches to interviewing as there are epistemologies,

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which might range from “[n]eopositivist, emotionalist or romantic, constructionist, transformative, decolonizing, and new materialist” (np). These epistemologies apply to a variety of interview methods, including oral surveys, qualitative interviews, oral history interviews, and methods falling between labeled approaches. For example, Kaia Simon uses “semi-structured oral

literacy history interviews” (5) with women who were children at the time that their families relocated as Hmong refugees to the United States (6), and Suzanne Marie Enck and Blake A. McDaniel collect “semi-structured oral history interviews” with incarcerated women to study the relationship between storytelling and agency (44). I do not search for oral histories in select literacy journals to argue for an ideal form of pure oral history, but to emphasize the irony that oral histories are seldom cited when—unlike other forms of interviews—they could be.

Though oral histories and qualitative interviews are not opponents—indeed, their praxis and the study of that praxis overlaps significantly—their shared traits help to highlight their differences. Sharan Merriam and Robin Grenier summarize that the goal of qualitative interviewing is “to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, an individual, or a situation” (20); an interview study

is deemed valid if the interviews proposed will contribute to the researcher's discipline. Merriam and Grenier add that "The mere fact that this topic has not been previously investigated does not, in and of itself, justify doing the research; maybe there's no need to know the answers" (20). Oral histories, on the other hand, operate with an understanding that recordings of voices and communities that have not before contributed to archival records are inherently valuable. Many oral history practitioners understand oral histories as a tool for social justice, making possible what John Duffy calls "a more inclusive and democratic kind of history" (98). Oral historians Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki show how feminist oral history praxis, which developed in earnest in the early 1990s and early 2000s (97–8), frames oral history-making as not only a way to create "primary source material," but also "an ethical and political practice that has since been shown to have value in and of itself" (98). If qualitative interviews seek "answers," oral histories seek opportunities for individuals and communities to share what they know, feel, and wonder about.

Released from the requirement of seeking answers, oral histories are well suited to spark conversation. Oral historian Linda Shopes writes that "[o]ral history is, at its heart, a dialogue" ("Making Sense"), and many oral historians agree with her.³ Duffy explains the ability for oral histories to make visible multi-directional power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee as a "co-operative undertaking, as researcher and informant collaborate in the construction of the past" (87). Often, the dialogue does not occur through a single conversation, but through a series of conversations that build relationship(s) over time. Sheftel and Zembrzycki emphasize the importance

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of the *slowness* of the oral history process, from relationship and trust building with participants, to taking breaks during interviews, to sitting with, rather than editing out, "the very real circumstances—uncomfortable and difficult moments, silences, interpretive conflicts, ethics of inequality, and the distance created by political differences—in which stories are told" (98).

While several qualitative researchers have urged practitioners of qualitative interviews to be more transparent about the "interactional organization" of interviews (Potter and Hepburn 566), and to more explicitly explore in what ways an interview is "co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee" (Talmy 27), oral histories bake transparency and acknowledgment of dialogue into the process.

Finally, I am focusing on citing oral histories *because we can*. One of the driving spirits of oral history-making is that they will become publicly available—specifically beyond academia. Sheftel and Zembrzycki describe this as part of the "collaborative commitment" of oral history, with an aim to "communicate with a wider public (not just a niche group of academics)" (104). This tenet contrasts with the many forms of qualitative interviews that are subject to IRB approval. While qualitative researchers must convince IRB committees that their protocols will protect the privacy and identities of their participants, oral histories are "defined by the assumption that interviews are conducted for the permanent record and are to be made publicly available" ("Oral History").⁴ Oral histories thus

make unnecessary the many concerns of some qualitative researchers when assessing the validity of qualitative interviews. For example, Merriam and Grenier suggest, among other practices, that a researcher using qualitative interviews interrogates how their own interpretation of “reality” affects what is being studied (26); Steven Talmy critiques researchers’ tendency to isolate quotations from interviewees absent of the interviewer’s question or other context (31); and Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn argue that interviews need to more “[fully displaying] the active role of the interviewer” (556). These important critiques of, and proposed standards for, qualitative interviews are an effect of the transcripts and audio files being unavailable to anyone beyond the researcher. Studies using qualitative interviews invite other scholars to cite the research using the interviews, whereas oral histories make it possible for scholars to cite the interview and/or its participants directly.

This is not to say that oral histories ignore questions about privacy and safety of participants. Shopes explains that when interviewees are given the option to speak under a pseudonym or anonymously, they often choose to be identified: “Typically, narrators are proud of having contributed their story to the permanent record and wish to be associated with it” (“Oral History, Human Subjects”). For narrators who require or prefer more privacy, oral history best practices offer ways to honor privacy while making narratives public. For example, in the SCU project that includes Jazz’s narrative, narrators are identified by their first name and only *some* of the entries include a photo (“SCU”).⁵ Further, only ten of the 14 narratives are currently available to the public, while the remaining four are “restricted until a future date” (“SCU”).⁶ Each of these measures considers the safety and comfort level of the participant and lets them choose the degree to which their donation is linked to their identity with the understanding that the conversion will be made public.

ORAL HISTORIES IN LITERACY STUDIES

To learn how literacy scholars engage with oral histories, I worked with a sample of journals based on representation in the past five years of the series *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition*. This annual anthology engages a wide readership to decide which articles best “showcase the innovative and transformative work now being published in the field’s journals” (Pauszek, Girdharry, and Lesh). Of all the journal titles represented in the last five issues, three journals are represented every year: *Community Literacy Journal (CLJ)*, *Reflections*, and *Literacy in Composition Studies (LiCS)* (Appendix A). I base my study on these three journals not to suggest that they represent all of composition and literacy, but to create a sample from journals that continuously publish work that writers, editors, and readers find compelling. I acknowledge that this selection process is inevitably somewhat arbitrary, since the articles that are included in the *Best of* issues do not necessarily have anything to do with my focus on oral histories: that is, I am not looking at the titles of articles included in the *Best of* anthologies, but the archives of the journals represented in the annual anthology.

Within this sample, I limit my search from 2016 to the time of writing, 2022, to compensate for the variation of publication longevity and frequency across the three journals. This covers approximately five years of publishing and begins a search at a socio-cultural moment in which democracy, inclusion, and activist writing and speaking are once again particularly relevant. In each

time frame and in each journal, I search for “oral history” and “oral histories,” then filter through the results to find only the articles in which oral histories are a significant component of the author’s research or teaching (see Appendix B for detailed explanation of these “filters”). From these results, I track the ways in which oral histories are used.

Table 1: Presence of Oral Histories in Articles Published from 2016 to 2022 in Three Literacy Journals.

	<i>Community Literacy Journal, 2016– 2022</i>	<i>Reflections, 2016–2022</i>	<i>Literacy in Composition Studies, 2016– 2022</i>	Totals
Articles that significantly use oral histories	1	4	3	8
Existing oral histories are used pedagogically	1	1	0	2
Existing oral histories are used for author’s research	0	0	2	2
Existing oral histories are cited as a source	0	0	2	2
New oral histories are created	1	4	1	6
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader	0	0	0	0

This table shows that use of oral histories among published research in composition and literacy studies is rare. The final column in Table 1 shows that most scholars using oral history are doing so by recording new narratives, which occurs in six of the eight articles. By contrast, oral histories are used pedagogically in two of the eight articles and as a source for research in two of the eight. What is perhaps most surprising, given the information provided above about the emphasis in oral history-making as one of public availability, is that of the 6 projects that create new oral histories, none of them tell readers where they might find the full audio files or transcripts of those oral histories. Overall, Table 1 shows a significant preference for creating oral histories over citing them or preserving them.

There are several limitations to my process: including more journals with an expanded period might tell us something else about how scholars in the field use oral history. Further, using keywords to search for “oral history/ies” assumes neat boundaries between oral histories and other forms of interviews, which is not the case in practice. There is a slippage between terms like oral histories, interviews, oral stories, and so many more, with some researchers using the terms interchangeably, and others distinguishing them more deliberately. For example, in “Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning,” which is one of the articles

included in the above table under *LiCS*, Douglas Hall and Michael Harker use the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives to explore E'rich Harrington's narrative to study aging and literacy of technology: they also advocate for using the DALN as a source for an "oral history collection" (162). Because they frame the DALN as a source for oral histories, their article appeared in my search. Yet, Harrington's interview is four minutes and 29 seconds long: is this an "oral history" in the sense of the "slow" forms of extended dialogue discussed above, or is it another form of history that is oral?

Other researchers working with the DALN did not show up in my search because they did not frame the resource as a database of oral histories. Alicia McCartney's work with 18 literacy narratives from the DALN explores how previously and currently homeschooled students understand their own literacies. The narratives that she studies are in "a variety of formats: written texts, video and audio interviews, self-recorded video, and audio narratives" (46), but because McCartney does not use the phrase "oral history," her work is not included. Searching with keywords, then, is rarely as straightforward as it appears: I discuss this further in my conclusion.

Alongside these limitations, Table 1 shows that scholars who record oral histories are not making them publicly available (at least not by the time of the publication of the articles that discuss those projects). While the information for best practices on "accession," the process through which a repository gains "custody" of oral history narratives, is readily available on the Oral History Association website, that information also makes it clear that finding a platform for oral histories is no simple task (*Archiving Oral History*). Accession likely requires the time to build relationships with institutions and archivists, filling out more paperwork, and perhaps even financial resources. These barriers to accession could go hand in hand with the low numbers of citations of oral history sources: if researchers in literacy aren't making their oral history projects publicly available, then future literacy scholars won't find and cite those oral histories.⁷

This penchant for creating more so than citing oral sources is not unique to literacy studies. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes argue that oral histories have a "marginal nature," manifesting in "thousands and thousands of tapes lying unused in drawers and archives," though, they note, digitization of oral histories may help with this (vii). Oral historian Michael Frisch describes oral histories as an example of methods showing an "uncritical rush to the supply side, especially given the ease of entry and the assumed demand for its products" (22); the phrase "assumed demand" suggests that the demand is not necessarily active. In 2016, Jessica Wagner Webster explored a similar observation to my own among archiving journals, noting that "archival professional literature is surprisingly sparse in its presentation of oral history case studies" (255), despite evidence that "archivists feel that conducting oral histories is a key part of their work" (259). It is possible, then, that what was once "thousands and thousands of tapes" unused in drawers might now be hundreds of thousands of recordings unopened on websites.⁸

I am not suggesting that researchers withdraw their IRB packages for qualitative interviews and turn en masse to citing oral histories already archived for primary sources; nor am I suggesting that oral historians call off their oral history projects. Rather, I suggest that giving attention to the many oral history projects that do exist in public record could benefit the field. To see more clearly how oral histories are relevant to work that prioritizes the knowledge of underrepresented communities in

literacy studies, in the next section I explore ways in which Jazz's narrative, to take just one example of other relevant published oral histories, could contribute to scholars interested in expanding the scope of ideological models of writing and literacy.

CITING JAZZ'S NARRATIVE IN LITERACY RESEARCH

The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project makes available ten oral histories recorded between May 2012 and May 2014 with students and staff at St. Catherine University. Designed and directed by Louise Edwards-Simpson, who is also the interviewer, the project's stated aim was to "document the intersection of between housing instability and higher education as experienced by members of our Twin Cities campus community" ("SCU Voices"). The stories that Jazz shares respond to Edwards-Simpson's questions about her childhood, experiences with housing security, her journey through education prior to and during her time at St. Kate's, and her future plans (the full list of questions is available online, listed as "Interview Questionnaire"). With these categories of question giving a basic guide to the conversation, Jazz shares some of her memories growing up in Chicago in the 1980s and '90s, moving to Minnesota at the age of fourteen, where she experienced for the first time being surrounded by whiteness (1–2, 4). As a young adult, she entered a non-accredited LPN training program, found employment, and soon purchased her first home. She soon learned, however, that the mortgage she'd been approved for was "predatory," and the rising bills, in addition to being laid off and discovering she was not re-hirable due to her training's lack of accreditation, meant that she faced foreclosure at the age of 21 (7). After a long journey of getting back on her feet, which included finding housing for herself and her two small children, recovering from addiction, and matriculating at St. Kate's to continue her education all the while enduring stigmatization and racism Jazz participates in the oral history project the year that she will graduate. She is one of the few donors who chose to include a photo of herself on the project's landing page: presumably donated after the time of the interview, the photo shows Jazz in full graduation regalia, cheering.

Jazz's narrative could contribute as both a primary source and as contextual evidence to support or complicate findings, or to inform methodology of a variety of research projects. As a primary source, her narrative could be engaged through discourse analysis. The push several decades ago to bring discourse analysis into studies of written texts (Bazerman and Prior; Barton), might now be reversed, or at least returned to, with a responding push for expanding discourse analysis on oral histories. Following Alessandro Portelli's emphasis on the potential for oral history to record "a history of the non-hegemonic classes" based on "the speaker's subjectivity," Jennifer Clary-Lemon suggests that "[i]f researchers connect the value of oral history with the rigor of discourse analysis, it is quite possible to open up an entirely new path to discourse analysis that privileges bottom-up approaches to the benefit of understanding greater complexities of social relations" (21).⁹ In her narrative, Jazz enriches what her listeners/readers know about "the complexities of social relations" in several ways. Early on in the recording, Edwards-Simpson asks if Jazz's living situation as a young girl was a "secure housing situation." Jazz answers:

Now that is debatable. I'm not sure if our housing was unstable or if my mother just liked to

move. I know that as a child, we moved frequently [...] I always noticed that we always lived somewhere cozy. If our living situations were unstable I was unaware of that. But they could have very well have been because we moved so frequently” (2:30–3:07, my emphasis).¹⁰

The words I embolden, “debatable,” various “if”s, and the phrase “could very well have been,” all suggest movement in Jazz’s reflection on this period of her life. They also show how her memories resist imposed labels from her adult self (and her interviewer), as she considers “lik[ing] to move” and “somewhere cozy” alongside “unstable.” These conditional words and phrases could contribute to a study on memories of precarity, verbal protection of vulnerability, or methods of narrative agency.

Jazz’s oral history might also contribute to studies on oral rhetorical strategies, since the audio file is publicly available, allowing researchers to study sound elements in her narration. For example, the speed with which a narrator speaks can provide information about a story or memory: “dwelling on an episode,” Alessandro Portelli writes, “may be a way of stressing its importance, but also a strategy to distract attentions from other more delicate points. In all cases, there is a relationship between the velocity of the narrative and the meaning of the narrator” (66). Or, a study might consider how laughter is used in oral narratives. Jazz often laughs after sharing a hardship, including when she realizes how “I skipped the whole homeless part!” (16:35), and after a description of her time living in a one-bedroom apartment with her two children that closes with the phrase, “we lived in that apartment for a long time” (19:30). Her laughter after descriptions of situations that are not literally funny is a form of rhetorical positioning that informs understandings of how she looks back on those moments.¹¹

These examples might be used as primary sources for studies on narrating precarity, oral rhetorical strategies, and narrative agency; other parts of Jazz’s narrative might contribute to the research required to conduct new oral histories and/or qualitative interviews. As contextualizing evidence, oral histories might inform methodology, context on particular topics, or complicate findings in concluding remarks. For example, oral histories could contribute to “triangulation” methods in qual-

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itative studies, a practice that Merriam and Grenier explain as using multiple sources of information so that “what someone tells you in an interview can be checked” with information from other sources (26). Or, researchers developing an interview protocol might

use Jazz’s narrative during their design, thanks to Edwards-Simpson’s final question, which asks what other questions Jazz would ask, were she conducting the interview. Jazz’s answer prompts the following exchange:

J - I would ask questions about marital status and sexual orientation.

L - Ok. Would you care to answer those questions?

J - I identify as non-heterosexual. I don’t know, I’m just difficult, not bisexual or anything like that just non-heterosexual. I’m also single and never married but as an orientation leader in the past and particularly transfer orientation, I hear a lot of women say I’m back

in school because my husband blank... my husband left me, my husband died, my husband is sick and can't work anymore.

L - Lost his job, in jail.

J - Wherever and it's like my husband blank. Sometimes some people story is my husband blank but that's not my story. (1:09:27–1:10:10)

Future interviewers interested in narratives about education experiences might take note of Jazz's suggestions and cite her ideas as a source in their own research. In the above excerpt, Jazz's self-identification as a "non-heterosexual" might inform scholars thinking about how to ask participants of a study about their sexuality. Further, Jazz's exploration of her own identity and how it marginalizes her from academic and non-academic environments could inform researchers studying marginalized identities in multiple environments. Her observations of how gendered sexuality impacts women's simultaneous experiences of education and poverty could be engaged by scholars who are exploring literacy in contexts of LGBTQIA communities and/or low-income environments. Just as we would not pursue written academic inquiry without citing other scholars, why should we not also cite oral sources that inform the methods we use to conduct oral interviews?

As a final example for how Jazz's narrative might contribute to literacy scholarship, I cite an anecdote that Jazz shares regarding her experiences with racism throughout her education. I cite the exchange at length to make visible the range of topics that she brings up:

J - So class hasn't began yet and me and my classmate I'm sitting next to, we're talking about the inflation in tuition here and we're like "Ah you know, it's already expensive enough and then they're raising it \$40 more," and so my classmate in front of me turns around and she's like "Why do you even care how expensive tuition is?" I didn't even understand what she was saying... like why wouldn't I care about tuition if I have to pay it. She was like "Oh, you pay tuition?" And I said "Yeah, why wouldn't I pay tuition?" "Oh 'cause you know, what I thought all black people got the United Negro College Fund."

L - Oh my gosh!

J - And she was dead serious.

...

J - So I'm stunned.

L - What did you think about that?

J - I was like "Well you obviously don't know much about the United Negro College Fund because in order to be eligible for the United Negro College Fund, you have to go to a historically black college, St. Kate's is not that so I'm [not] getting the United Negro College Fund. Secondly the United Negro College Fund gives you \$10,000 a year."

L - That's it?

J - "Even if I was getting the United Negro College Fund, which I'm not because [SCU] is predominantly white, I would still be worried about tuition. So before you make assumptions like that and make statements like that, you should know the facts behind what you were saying." (56:30–58:50).

Jazz's experience with racism at her university emphasizes assumptions made by her peers, and likely

other students at other universities, as well as of a faculty member (i.e., the interviewer’s question “That’s it?”). Further, the oral modes of this telling show rhetorical strategies. Her use of “secondly” and “Even if . . . which I’m not,” with a concluding “So before you make assumptions” employs oral strategies of persuasion that researchers might explore in ideological literacy contexts. This section of Jazz’s narrative, and others, might offer valuable context to scholars working with storytelling about racism, peer-to-peer interactions in undergraduate environments, and the spread of misinformation among student communities. Jazz’s oral history, along with the nine other conversations recorded for the SCU project, help literacy scholars understand how students construct their narratives of precarity, and how navigating and surviving that precarity shapes their oral and written literacy praxis.

KEYWORDS AND CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I explore one more barrier to citing oral histories: the same “slowness” that Sheftel and Zembrzycki position as a benefit of oral history making (see above) also asks more of researchers. While studying the aural information in oral history audio files, such as the use of pausing, sarcasm, or tone, is compelling and vital to literacy work, we might spend hours listening to a narrative and decide it is not directly relevant to our focus. There is, as of yet, no “control-f” search function for audio files. Citing oral histories, then, could mean adding hours to a research time slot that, for most academics, is already limited.

Even before listening to files, however, a researcher’s likelihood of engaging with one audio file over another is largely based on keywords, the primary gatekeepers of research. In the inaugural issue of *LiCS*, Brenda Glascott positions her exploration of how “literacy” and “rhetoric” function as keywords as part of a broader discussion about research over time. She writes that “history is

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summoned by the present and circumscribed by the language we use in the summoning. Historians and archivists work with partial vision: our keywords, key questions, key interests point our gaze in certain directions

and there is little assurance we are not missing important elements just beyond our peripheral vision” (18). Applying this to citing oral histories, the keywords that introduce an oral history to potential researchers also inherently interpret the narrative. The researcher who compiles and labels an oral history into a particular collection anticipates who might engage with that narrative.

These keywords exist for good reason: we probably have keywords to thank for anyone citing an existing oral history at all. As someone studying the oral history narratives of people experiencing homelessness, it was the title of the oral history project (“SCU Voices of Homelessness”) and the key words for Jazz’s narrative (“Housing insecurity, frequent moves, food insecurity, intergenerational poverty, single parent”) that signaled that her narrative would be important for me to hear. However, as I continued to work with the file, I became interested in other aspects of her narrative, including but not limited to the content that I cite above. The complexity of her narrative could be described by

alternative sets of keywords, including the following:

First generation homeowner; first generation college student; predatory lending; non-accredited education programs; debt

or

Racist peers; obstruction to education; non-transferrable credits; non-traditional college student; students teaching peers

or

Power dynamics in interviews; resilience against systems; laughter as rhetoric; sarcasm as resilience; confidence as composition

Any of these sets of keywords would have made me less likely to open the files as part of my work on homelessness, as they would more effectively draw in scholars studying education narratives or resilience in marginalized students. While sets of keywords do not literally obstruct entrance to a particular narrative, they are a researcher's initial encounter with a source, an encounter that likely determines whether they select one file over so many others. Further, because oral histories often come as part of a larger project, any keywords describing the narrative are likely to emphasize that narrative's relevance to the archive to which it belongs.

Oral historians are in the throes of these questions, debating the consequences and potentials of how digitization, the internet, and technology affect oral history-making and disseminating. Tools such as the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), which allows researchers to index and synchronize audio files with transcripts to "enhance search and discovery of information in online audio and video" (OHMS 3), effectively makes oral histories more searchable, taking some of the burden off of the limitation of keywords: yet each index created is a framing. Sheftel and Zembrzycki identify some of the tensions between technologies such as the OHMS, which have the potential to "create the conditions for an equitable, engaged, and collaborative research model" (96), while at the same time taking away from the "slowness" that makes oral histories so important. They write,

Indexing implies that we are listening principally for information rather than for the more subjective elements of an interview and, beyond that, the meaning they contain. How does one index a silence? . . . is there a way to index the interpersonal dynamics of the reciprocal oral history process—the conflicts, difficult moments, inequalities, and political differences that we noted earlier? People's life stories are complex, intertwined, and often nonlinear, and what they tell us depends on the kinds of relationships we form with them. (103)

Scholars in literacy might engage with oral histories for both purposes that Sheftel and Zembrzycki summarize. We might word-search indexed transcripts for words like "letters," "message," or "feedback," but we might also listen to an entire narrative, noting pauses, tones, and power dynamics in dialogue.

If our searches rely on keywords, and if we as academics are the creators of keywords, then perhaps we can both create keywords and engage with them more deliberately. Matthew Overstreet's exploration of digital media literacy helps to frame how scholars might include oral histories and other forms of oral knowledge into our work. He writes that "When we engage the world through digital media, our tools shape our perception, thought and action. But tools never act alone" (48).

Because scholars interested in writing and literacy are, “most of us anyway, humanists,” he argues, “we best engage these technologies not on the level of code or circuitry, but on the level of human thought and behavior. How do our tools shape how we think, write, read, and relate? How can we design better patterns of engagement?” (62). Or, as Amy Wan says, “It’s important to do the work in terms of our own research design, and this includes considering what is missing and why that’s the case, creating spaces and opportunities to amplify voices” (118). What I hope that I have suggested here is that, in order to ask *how* we might cite oral histories, and what kind of work is required for doing so, we might first consider *that* we cite them.

At the end of Jazz’s narrative, the interviewer asks if Jazz would like to add anything else before they close. Jazz responds: “I guess one last thing I should say is that to people with housing insecurity just know that it’s going to get better and it might not get better on your time but it will be the right time when it happens” (1:11:30). Edwards-Simpson’s invitation for Jazz to fill in what a researcher might have missed makes it possible for Jazz to summon a non-academic audience. Jazz applies her literacy for navigating homelessness simultaneously with education systems to the imagined community of listeners who might be searching for stories not so much to cite, but to use as guides. It is Jazz, not the researcher, who sees the relevance of her narrative to other people who have experienced homelessness and education obstacles; it is Jazz, and not the researcher, who knows the value of an underrepresented narrative to communities crafting underrepresented narratives of their own.

Appendix A: Journals Represented
in the *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition*
from the Last Five Years (2015-2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Numbers in parenthesis indicate repeat appearances.

Across the Disciplines (2)
Basic Writing eJournal
College Composition and Communication (3)
Community Literacy Journal (5)
Composition Forum (2)
Composition Studies (4)
Enculturation (3)
Harlot (2)
Journal of Basic Writing (2)
The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics
Journal of Second Language Writing (3)
Journal of Teaching Writing (3)
KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society
Literacy in Composition Studies (5)
Pedagogy
Philosophy and Rhetoric
Present Tense (3)
Reflections (5)
Research in the Teaching of English
Rhetoric of Health & Medicine
Rhetoric Review (2)
Rhetoric Society Quarterly (2)
Teaching English in the Two-Year College (2)
Technical Communication Quarterly
WAC Journal (2)
WLN Journal of Writing Center Scholarship (4)
WPA (2)
Writing Center Journal
Writing on the Edge

Appendix B: Explanation of Process and Annotated Bibliography of Relevant Sources

Community Literacy Journal

Process and Results

Using the site's search engine, I searched for "oral history" and "oral histories," limiting results to the last five years and to scholarly articles. This generated one article:

Trimble, Thomas, Patricia Baldwin, Mansoor Mubeen, and Christine Lawson. "The 1967 Project" (*CLJ*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2020).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	Yes
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

This article discusses how undergraduates recorded oral history narratives with "older adults" who experienced the violence of the Detroit Rebellion in the summer of 1967. As part of their preparation for recording interviews, students "listened to some of the oral histories cataloged on the website Detroit1967.org" (159). After the interviews, students used data from the recordings and other archival material to "write a research-based essay" (154). The article does not say whether these interviews are available to the public. Oral histories are not cited explicitly (though within the article the author provides the Detroit1967.org website, which directs readers to a collection of oral history narratives, among other material).

Reflections

The archive search function on this site does not allow filtering by date. I searched "oral histor," to account for both "oral history" and "oral histories," which generates nine results. I then filtered these results to locate only those articles that use oral histories as a method in the research. Two articles were outside of my time range: Susie Lan Cassel's "A Hunger for Memory: Oral History Recovery in Community-Service Learning" (2000), and Lisa Roy-Davis's review of "*Conquistadora* by Esmeralda Santiago (2013). Two of the remaining seven sources use "oral histor" as a peripheral mention that is not a significant part of the study's methods: "Community Literacy as Justice Entrepreneurship: Envisioning the Progressive Potential of Entrepreneurship in a Post-Covid Field (vol. 21, no. 1, 2022) and "ISU Quarantine Journal Project: Reflective Writing, Public Memory, and Community Building in Extraordinary Times" (vol. 21, no. 1, 2022)). Of the remaining five results, one is a list of "publications" simply listing the titles of articles.

This leaves four articles that employ oral histories.¹²

1) "Cultivating Empathy on the Eve of the Pandemic" by Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Tamara Dean, Rachel Alsbury, Julia Buskirk, Margot Higgins, Eloise Johnson, Sharon Koretskov, Brad Steinmetz, Emma Waldinger, Samuel Wood, and Carl Zuleger. (*CLJ*, vol. 21,

no. 1, 2022).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	Yes
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

This article describes how an undergraduate course pivoted during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, students recorded oral histories to contribute to a local archive of flood narratives. No longer able to do so during the pandemic, the next cohort engaged with the archive by listening to existing narratives and participating in “quality control [of] transcripts of oral histories” gathered earlier (np). Narratives from the flood archive are not cited, nor does the article direct the reader where to go to access the oral histories (though they can be found through a google search, by which I found this link: <https://www.wisconsinfloodstories.org/>).

2) “If We Knew Our History: Building on the Insights of Past Prison Teachers” by Laura Rogers (CLJ, vol. 19, no. 1, 2019).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Rogers records six oral history interviews with “teachers who taught in various carceral sites during the 1970s and early 1980s” (215). Rogers concludes that “The oral histories attest to the multiple and complex reasons these teachers had for teaching in challenging and even dangerous situations” (226). Rogers does not cite other oral histories or tell readers where to access those that she collected.

3) “Counternarratives: Community Writing and Anti-Racist Rhetoric” by Laurie Grobman, Elizabeth Kemmerer, and Meghan Zebertavage. (CLJ, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author's research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Students, community members, and the author collaborated to record 22 oral history interviews with African Americans who lived in Reading, Pennsylvania during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. While students read about oral history making, they did not read existing oral histories as part of their preparation (50–51). The recorded interviews contribute to a manuscript that was printed into 250 copies, made available online, and preserved in a museum (45). I select “NO” for

whether the oral histories are accessible to the reader because they contribute to the manuscript but do not seem to be available in full interview form.

4) “Listening to Ferguson Voices, Finding the Courage to Resist” by Joel R. Pruce (*CLJ* Special Winter Issue, 2017–2018).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author’s research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Undergraduate students and “practitioner partners” recorded oral history interviews with “people who witnessed and shaped the uprising following the shooting death of Michael Brown” (57–58). After collecting the videos, the team shared the stories in a “storytelling website” and “limited series podcast” (68). While these modes are accessible, they lead to short excerpts each running a few minutes long, and they do not include the questions of the interviewer.

Literacy in Composition Studies

Process and Results

Using the journal’s search engine, I searched for articles with “oral history” and “oral histories” published after 2015, which yielded eight results. Among the eight are two editors’ introductions that reference scholars’ work in the issue using oral histories (special issue introduction to vol. 6, no. 2 by Lauren Marshall Bowen, and general editors’ introduction to vol. 4, no. 1). Among the remaining six are three peripheral references of these search terms: Steve Parks’ “I Hear Its Chirping Coming From My Throat: Activism, Archives, and the Long Road Ahead”; Michael Blancato, Gavin P. Johnson, Beverly J. Moss, and Sara Wilder’s “Brokering Community-Engaged Writing Pedagogies: Instructors Imagining and Negotiating Race, Space, and Literacy”; and Kaia Simon’s “Daughters Learning from Fathers: Migrant Family Literacies that Mediate Borders” (vol 5, no. 1), in which the term “oral history” appears in a statement made by one of the participants in the research, but the research itself uses “semi-structured oral literacy history,” approved by a IRB.

This leaves three articles in the time range that employ oral histories.

1) “Beyond Basic Reading and Writing: The People’s House and the Political Literacy Education of the Student-Activists of the Black Liberation Front International, 1968-1975” by Joy Karega (*LiCS*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author’s research:	No
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	No
New oral histories are created:	Yes
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Joy Karega conducts two oral history interviews with members of the Black Liberation Front International (BLFI) (28). After initial oral history interviews, through which she asked

“open-ended questions about the BLFI’s political activism and the reading and writing practices that supported this activism,” she conducted follow-up interviews with tiered questions informed by the first interviews (25). Karega adds her own oral histories by speakers’ names to her Works Cited section; however, the format of these citations do not direct researchers to where they might find the source, e.g. “Boone, Ernie. Oral History Interview. 2 Sept. 2012.”) After reading this article, readers do not know how to access these interviews.

2) “Lifeworld Discourse, Translingualism, and Agency in a Discourse Genealogy of César Chávez’s Literacies” by Clay Walker (*LiCS*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author’s research:	Yes
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	Yes
New oral histories are created:	No
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Clay Walker uses a published compilation of oral history interviews to explore the “lifeworld discourse” of César Chávez (24). Walker explains that these interviews were conducted by Jacques Levy during the early 1970s: “Levy acts as an archivist assembling transcriptions of Chávez’s oral interviews, which were selected and compiled by Levy into book form, but without any editorial narrative synthesizing or otherwise commenting on Chávez’s recollections” (25). This compiled book is included in Walker’s citations. While this might be a stretch to include this as a citation of an oral history, as it is unclear if Levy left entire transcripts of each “selection” or if interviews are excerpted, I follow the author’s designation that they are oral histories.

3) “Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning” by Douglas Hall and Michael Harker (*LiCS*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018).

Existing oral histories are used pedagogically:	No
Existing oral histories are used for author’s research:	Yes
Existing oral histories are cited as a source:	Yes
New oral histories are created:	No
New oral histories are accessible in full to the reader:	No

Douglas Hall and Michael Harker use the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives to study the video literacy narrative of E’rich Harrington, in which he explains his experiences with technology as an older person. The authors focus on DALN as “a site for composition scholars to mine attitudes and conceptions of aging and literacy” (158). They also propose how their work can be activated in classroom settings through what they call an “oral history collection event that employs the DALN” (162). This “event” includes learning from the DALN and recording new interviews to contribute to its collection; this is a “proposed pedagogical approach” (162) and not a summary of what students have done in their classrooms (hence the “NO” answers to the pedagogical question in the chart).

NOTES

¹ Though in this article I focus on using oral histories in research, using oral histories in classrooms is also an important part of scholarly inclusion through citation. For example, oral histories can support teaching that challenges the continued hierarchy of “essayist literacy” (see Marcia Farr) in writing classrooms.

² I make this observation with no amount of self-righteousness: while I have recorded oral histories and conducted interviews, I have never cited an oral history prior to this article.

³ Michael Frisch writes that oral history is unique because its “documents [. . . are] explicit dialogues about memory” (22); Janesick describes the method as one in which “participants are focusing on key issues of the past and the present and freely communicate their thoughts through a give-and-take, so to speak, of responses and questions” (46); and Daniel Kerr argues that “More central to our [oral historians’] practice than our production of recordings, transcripts, collections, articles, and monographs, is the fact that we facilitate dialogues grounded in personal experiences and interpretive reflections on the past” (371).

⁴ Oral historians have a decades-long relationship with IRB committees that oral historians describe as “contentious” (Smith 140), a “controversy” (Janesick 54), and based on “proscriptions [that] make little sense to oral historians” (Shopes, “Oral History”). IRB requirements to preserve privacy of interviewees are antithetical to the goals of oral histories: in stronger terms, Shopes explains that these requirements “violate[s] a fundamental principle of oral history,” which is that they be made publicly available (np). In 2019, the tension in this relationship was somewhat relieved when federal IRB requirements considered exempt those oral history projects that cannot be classified by a specific definition of “research” (Information about IRBs). However, this exemption continues to operate in a gray area. Depending on how oral historians frame their project, who sits on the IRB committee, and the event or theme around which stories are collected, a collective oral history project could be considered “research.”

⁵ The SCU Voices of Homelessness Oral History Project, which was published in 2012, did undergo a full IRB process (Edwards-Simpson). It is likely that were the project initiated today, it would be considered exempt.

⁶ There is room for further exploration of the tensions between privacy and attribution in oral history making. For example, my citation for Jazz’s oral history is titled “Jazz” yet is accompanied by the researcher’s entire name: we could, then, find out more about the researcher but not about the narrator. This puts researchers citing Jazz’s narrative, such as myself, in the position of working with an individual’s story as a source that is somewhat separate from the individual—though it is much closer than the information that is possible via other methods.

⁷ There are, however, several databases where researchers can find oral history collections. Larger collections with helpful search functions include the [Oral History Archives at Columbia](#) and the “Centers and Collections” resource webpage of the Oral History Association.

⁸ Allison Mills shows how the digitization of oral sources can be an act of colonialism when it is not undertaken in partnership with communities from whom those sources originate. For example,

“ethnographic field recordings” conducted by researchers in indigenous communities decades ago that may now be “vulnerable to degradation,” and thus considered for digitization, may “never have been intended by their teller to reach beyond a certain audience” (111). I explore this tension by considering the practice of citing oral histories that have been donated by narrators with full consent for public use.

⁹ It is possible that Clary-Lemon anticipates a developing energy in the field: a recent dissertation by Sean Moxley-Kelly uses narrative analysis on select oral histories from the Society of Women Engineers oral history project to “to reveal the claims participants make through stories, themes that are evident across those claims, and how women engineers effectively use stories to advance those claims” (i).

¹⁰ To emphasize the value of citing oral sources, I reference time stamps from the audio file of Jazz’s narrative rather than the written transcript.

¹¹ While I do not explore the importance of listening to oral sources, in addition to or perhaps in place of reading transcripts, in this article, I can note that scholars using both qualitative interview and oral history methods consider this an important distinction. For example, Potter and Hepburn write of qualitative interviews that “The provision of audio and video materials would help address a further problem with the representation of interview material, which is that the transcript may be faulty” (561). Similarly, Portelli laments the frequency with which oral histories are transcribed and how often “it is only transcripts that are published” (64).

¹² Editorial footnote: We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to this text: Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Tamara Dean, Rachel Alsbury, Julia Buskirk, Margot Higgins, Eloise Johnson, Sharon Koretskov, Brad Steinmetz, Emma Waldinger, Samuel Wood and Carl Zuleger. It is LiCS’ editorial policy to name all authors of a text instead of using “et al.” We do this because “et al.” can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.

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