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ENLIVENING HISTORY THROUGH PERSONAL STORIES AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

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ΖΩΝΤΑΝΕΥΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΜΕΣΑ ΑΠΟ ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΕΣ ΣΤΟ ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ ΑΜΕΡΙΚΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, as audio and video technology has become more advanced and widely available, the practice of gathering oral histories has become a common practice in museums worldwide. In addition, the framework created by the New Museology movement has privileged the role of first voice as a compelling tool to interpret difficult and memorable historical facts and processes. In this vein, the National Museum of American History is using oral histories to foster collaborations with communities across the nation and importantly, share those stories with a wider public. In this essay, case studies from two Museum projects, the *Bracero Oral History Archives* and *Our American*

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Journey project, will highlight how the Museum is using oral histories as both an archival and research tool, and avenue for public engagement and dialog.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Από τη δεκαετία του 1970, καθώς η οπτικοακουστική τεχνολογία αναπτύχθηκε περισσότερο και έγινε ευρέως προσιτή, η πρακτική συλλογής προφορικών ιστοριών έχει καταστεί κοινή πρακτική των μουσείων ανά τον κόσμο. Επιπλέον, το περιβάλλον που δημιουργήθηκε από το κίνημα της Νέας Μουσειολογίας έχει προωθήσει τον ρόλο της άμεσης προσωπικής φωνής, ως απαραίτητου εργαλείου για την ερμηνεία δύσκολων και σημαντικών ιστορικών γεγονότων και διαδικασιών. Σε αυτό το πλαίσιο το National Museum of American History / Εθνικό Μουσείο Αμερικανικής Ιστορίας του Smithsonian Institution χρησιμοποιεί προφορικές ιστορίες για να ενισχύσει τη συνεργασία με κοινότητες ανά τις ΗΠΑ και, κυρίως, για να μοιραστεί αυτές τις ιστορίες με ένα ευρύ κοινό. Στο παρόν κείμενο παρουσιάζονται ως μελέτες περίπτωσης δύο δράσεις του Μουσείου, η Δράση Προφορικής Ιστορίας *Bracero* και το *Δικό μας Αμερικανικό Ταξίδι*, για να φωτίσουν πώς το Μουσείο αξιοποιεί προφορικές ιστορίες ως αρχαιακό και ερευνητικό εργαλείο, αλλά και ως δυνατότητα δημόσιας συμμετοχής και διαλόγου.

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Introduction

Historians working in museums are concerned first to recognize and record memories through objects and oral histories, and secondly, to provide a place where individuals and groups can not only share, compare, and even confront memory but also relate these to broader histories.

(Kavanagh 1996: 5.)

Oral histories allow museums to provide a plurality of voices and perspectives. Since the 1960s, history museums in the United States have struggled to become more inclusive places, not only in terms of who visits the museum but also in what stories are told and how they are presented. As noted by Eric Gable and Richard Handler (1994: 34),

No longer do museums pretend to base their histories on ‘just the facts’. Rather museum historians wish to teach the public the crucial lesson that no version of the past is neutral or objective.

A myriad of political, social, domestic and economic data can be drawn from oral histories that can be used to inform the historical narrative. Rooted in anthropological practice, oral histories collected by history museums are not intended to provide an ethnography or series of life stories as studied by other institutions. Instead, they are used to illustrate historical events through first person narrative. Since its opening in 1964, the National Museum of American History has been actively collecting oral histories, and its Archives Center serves as a repository of recorded voices of renowned musicians, inventors, innovators, sports personalities and social leaders. In addition to being used by scholars from across the globe in their historical research, they have proved to be important tools for the Museum to present and discuss difficult and complicated historical stories with the public through exhibitions, digital educational materials, and outreach programs.

Case study - The *Bracero* Oral History Project

Unlike other forms of historical documentation, oral histories bring to life the personal experience, emotions, and private memories that allow the museum visitor to connect with a historical story from a more humane perspective. The *Bracero Oral History Project* is an example of a vibrant oral history program that helped both the oral history participants and the audience make connections to the larger historical narrative through personal connections.

The *Bracero Program*, a contract laborer program between the United States and Mexico in the mid-twentieth century, is a part of American history that is minimally documented and little known in both the US and other parts of the world. *Braceros* is the term applied to the agricultural and railroad workers brought to the US from Mexico as an emergency measure to fill the labor shortage after many Americans went to serve in the armed forces during World War Two. The *Bracero Program* was the official name for a series of laws and diplomatic agreements initiated between the US and Mexico at the time. Begun in 1942, the *Bracero Program* eventually became the largest guest worker program in US history. Between 1942 and 1964 more than four million Mexican employees came to work in the US as part of the Program. Small farmers, large growers, and farm associations in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, and twenty-three other states hired Mexican braceros to provide manpower during peak harvest and cultivation times.

The Smithsonian was interested in bringing this important part of American history to light while providing insight into Mexican American history and making connections between historical events and today's debates on guest worker programs and migration policy. The scholars and educators at the American History Museum realized early on they wanted to capture the spirit of the *braceros* and their families by bringing their stories to life for visitors and students in their own words. The final result was the exhibition and oral history project, *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964*. The project aimed to bringing humanity back to the museum through the innovative use of photographs and oral histories.

The *Bracero* initiative at the National Museum of American History was a five year project which involved a team of NMAH museum professionals and a group of universities including the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas El Paso, and the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University. The team gathered over 600 oral histories with braceros, their family members, growers, government officials and people who worked in the recruitment and processing of braceros. The team traveled to several different areas of the country (California, Texas, Arizona, Arkansas, Oregon, etc.) to conduct interviews in both English and Spanish, working with local community based cultural organizations. Local bracero advocates and labor organizers joined the efforts in identifying and recruiting braceros whom the team could interview.

An important connection that museums can bring to the oral history process is the documentation and collecting of objects and archival materials that give context to the oral histories. The Bracero Project oral history collecting teams asked interviewees to bring with them personal belongings that they might have used while in the *Bracero Program*, such as photographs, official documents, letters, a piece of clothing, or

anything else they wished to share. Many braceros brought cases containing items that the team photographed or scanned. These items were digitally saved and a copy of the files given to the owners. The interviewees then had the option of keeping their objects or donating the items to the National Museum of American History or their local cultural institution.

Through the oral history interview process, the team was able to acquire interesting objects for its permanent collections. Examples include a short-handle hoe or *cortito*, identification cards, a radio, tools, photographs, and a bunk bed from a labor camp of a lettuce grower in California. The *cortito* was an especially important artifact for the Museum's collections as it symbolized the workers' struggle and their fight for better working conditions during the *Bracero Program*. For decades agricultural workers in the Southwest stooped over crops using the short-handled hoe, often resulting in debilitating back pain. In the 1960s union organizers started working to improve conditions and pay for agricultural laborers, and in the 1970s the California Rural Legal Assistance successfully sued to have the short-handled hoe banned as an unsafe hand tool. This short-handled hoe was a gift to the Museum from the family of United Farm Workers leader and activist Cesar Chavez. In the way it is exhibited and discussed in conjunction with the braceros' oral histories, the National Museum of American History highlights the ways this artifact came to represent egalitarianism and recognition for Mexican people in US history.



El Cortito, a short-handle hoe. National Museum of American History.

The project culminated with a traveling exhibition and an award winning bilingual (English/Spanish) online archive, created in partnership with George Mason University,

with a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities (Bracero History Archive 2013). The online archive was designed to create a new model for collaborative documentation online. Staff at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University developed a system for collaborative, online archiving and cataloging to make available over 400 oral history interviews, 600 scanned documents, and 1,700 digital images collected by project partners. The website offers materials for a variety of users, including researchers, teachers, and students. Video tutorials help site visitors add their own stories to the archives and tag images and other data to use to create posters or other learning materials. Teaching units tied to United States History Curriculum Standards invite students in grades six through twelve¹ to explore primary source documents including photographs, maps, and immigration laws. And importantly, the public are invited to continue to share their own stories of labor and migration on the site.

Case study - The *Our American Journey* Project

The theme of migration/immigration today continues to be a hot topic in museums around the world. Globalization has caused people and communities to be displaced, created new economic hubs that people seek for improved opportunities, and created new social orders that have caused political unrest and migration as political asylum. The Smithsonian has recently embarked on a new, multi-year, pan-institutional Smithsonian project entitled *Our American Journey* that aims to present the five hundred year journey of how many distinct peoples met, mingled, and created the culture of the United States. Migrations brought new peoples, new languages, new religions, new ideas, and new technological innovations into the American experience. The result was cultural innovation.

As the scholars at the National Museum of American History learned through the Bracero Project, oral histories are essential to tell the personal stories of struggles and achievements, of dreams and dissolutions ever-present in almost every migration story. The *Our American Journey* exhibition will therefore include oral histories both already found in archives across the nation and newly recorded ones currently in development.

To kick-off the project in the summer of 2011, a group of Museum researchers and students from the University of Maryland in College Park, organized a day of oral history collection in an immigrant enclave in Prince Georges County, a suburb of Washington, DC, in a neighborhood with majority recent immigrant population. The team decided to organize the collecting day as part of the inauguration of a new cultural center associated with one of the most respectful immigrant-serving non-profit organizations in the area, Casa de Maryland. The opening festival gathered a number of community members from which we solicited their stories.

Like in the *Bracero Project*, it took time to recruit people who would be willing to share with us their story. Sometimes it was an issue of sensitivity, sometimes language was a barrier, and sometimes the questions were how the oral histories were going to be used and who would ultimately ‘own them’. The team spent six hours in situ and recorded thirteen oral histories. Teams were made up of cameraperson, interviewer and informant. Parts of the transcribed interviews will be incorporated into the *Our American Journey* exhibition, scheduled to open in 2015-16, in a section of the exhibition entitled, *The Nation We Make Together*, which focuses on migration to the United States post 1965. Beyond the intended use of the oral histories with this specific exhibition, stories collected will also be used in other Museum projects, such as a story of a Salvadorean immigrant who started selling traditional Salvadoran dish called “pupusas” at neighborhoods soccer games in an upcoming business history exhibition.

Conclusion

The use of oral histories in museums, both in exhibitions, on the web, and as sources for teaching are essential to provide visitors and users an unparalleled insight into the realities of their historical experiences. Yet, the archiving and accessibility of oral histories remains areas of much needed attention. The technologies used to record, to store, and to access the recorded voice is in constant new development. The possibilities of sharing oral history databases at a global scale have put access at the very center of the field.

Access to oral histories and sharing of data was in fact at the very core of the conference *Taking Stock: Oral Histories and Life Stories* at the Smithsonian Institution organized by the Archives of American Art and the Smithsonian Institutional Archives in the spring of 2013. The conference was a candid analysis of the challenges and opportunities of working with oral histories as data. Discussions were on different range of important topics including legal issues, new technologies, a lack of common framework, collaborations, methodologies, and usability. The most important discussions though were about digitization and access. The fact that the new redesigned United States social studies standards emphasizes the use of primary sources to build on the skills of critical thinking, historical thinking, sorting data, and civic values makes finding the best technology to record and share oral histories widely a priority for museums in the future. We believe Museums today have the responsibility and honor to share the many voices of history saved in their archives, for a more humane society.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Students between the ages of 11 and 18 years. [Editors' note.]