



# ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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President's Column



Co-Executive Directors' Report

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## World-wide audience attends Columbia University workshop on doing oral history in pandemic

More than 300 oral historians from around the world joined Columbia University oral history leaders April 16 eager for insights into how to face the challenges of doing oral history in an ongoing pandemic.

For starters, said Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia's Center for Oral History Research, don't try to do it alone.

Even if you recruit just one other person, you'll need to have someone with whom you can share the intense emotions associated with exploring narrators' experiences of disaster, Clark said.

She should know.

Clark, a past Oral History Association president, headed Columbia's September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project, which ultimately interviewed some 450 New Yorkers in the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

The longitudinal project offered insights into not only individual memories, but the creation of collective, public memories of the fateful attack and its aftermath, particularly for often-forgotten New Yorkers, she said.

Clark also is advising a Columbia University Nurses in Pandemics oral history interviewing project that focuses on front-line responders in the Ebola crisis in West Africa from 2013-16. Clark said the project aims to develop guidance for the public health community as an outcome of the nurses' interviews.

Experience from such large-scale projects also is helping to inform interviews of people's experiences related to the coronavirus in New York.

Unlike the terrorist attack, in which the Columbia oral historians pioneered real-time interviewing, the coronavirus pandemic is more of a "slow motion catastrophe," said Amy Starecheski, director of Columbia's Oral History Master of Arts program.

With pandemic-focused interviews, "we don't have an 'after' yet," Clark noted. While that may present challenges, it also may lead to broader lessons for public health moving forward, she said.

Representative sampling of interviewees typically is not a goal in disaster-based projects, but Clark indicated it is important now to record stories of people not only who are suffering in some way, but also those who deny the severity of the pandemic. In those interviews, she said, the interviewer must

always ask “why” and “please explain it to me” in an effort to understand the reasons for the person’s views.

Clark and Starecheski emphasized that the same oral history principles honed over many years still apply, including:

- Arrange the logistics of a virtual interview setting with the same considerations of an in-person interview, trying to minimize distractions
- Listen, listen, listen
- Ask follow-up questions
- Don’t assume you know the answers
- Embrace the silence; it allows you to absorb people’s stories
- Plan to archive the interviews and field notes but consider allowing pseudonyms if archives are to be widely available to the public

But unlike interviews that deal with less fraught topics, in pandemic-related interviews it may be best not to try to close with questions that summarize or recap the interview. Rather, Clark suggested, “let the interview stay open-ended,” just as the pandemic is.

To listen to the audio of the workshop “Oral History of Disasters and Pandemics,” go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbyRhAcj5Sg>

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## Yale’s Oral History of American Music featured in NYTimes anniversary story

Yale University’s Oral History of American Music, which is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, was the focus of an April 23 New York Times story that includes audio excerpts from several of the roughly 3,000 interviews in the OHAM collection. Check it out at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/arts/music/yale-american-music.html>.

The story traces the history of the massive collection, which was started by research librarian Vivian Perlis, whose initial work focused on the life of

composer Charles Ives.

Libby Van Cleve, OHAM executive director and a frequent participant at Oral History Association conferences, described for the Times the evolution of the collection. The story features excerpts from and anecdotes about a number of notable interviewees, including Aaron Copeland, Nadia Boulanger, John Cage, Eubie Blake and others.

The story notes that while several anniversary celebration events were set aside because of the coronavirus pandemic, OHAM recently created an online site titled “Alone Together: Musicians in the Time of Covid,” featuring short interviews with musicians. You can enjoy it

at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9CSb94y-8Qggy1wQN3ujqAz3XNgfM1Q4>

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## Extra time on your hands? New podcast focuses on class, capitalism

Vermont interdisciplinary artist Liz Medina explores class and capitalism in a new podcast, *En Masse*, with an inaugural season that shares stories from the Depression-era Works Progress Administration to the present in Barre, Vermont—the long-time “Granite Center of the World.”

The podcast’s episodes feature both contemporary oral histories, which she conducted, as well as oral histories of working-class people from the 1930’s Federal Writers’ Project, read by narrators, who then share their own stories and reflections on the oral history they performed.

The podcast explores both the universal experience of class, as well as its particularities, depending on who the workers are and where they live, according to Medina.

She said the goal of *En Masse* is to present stories of struggle and hope from the working class in a cultural space for working people to reflect on

their lives, recognizing themselves as agents of change and makers of history.

Listen to the podcast on the website at [www.enmassepodcast.com](http://www.enmassepodcast.com) or wherever you get your podcasts.

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# President's Column

By Allison K. Tracy-Taylor

I'm writing to keep you updated on the various ways the OHA is responding to the COVID-19 epidemic. This is an evolving situation requiring work in a number of areas. By beginning work now, we hope to get ahead of and mitigate negative impacts on the Association and our membership.

First, let me say I hope you all are staying safe. The seriousness of COVID-19 cannot be overstated. Further, state and federal guidelines on social distancing have impacted many of us in profound ways, the full extent of which we won't understand for weeks or months, even years. The health and well-being of you and your communities is of the highest priority. I ask you to follow all local and national orders on sheltering in place and social distancing, and I encourage you, as you are able, to prioritize self-care and care for your families and communities.

Second, we are continuing with planning for our 2020 Annual Meeting in Baltimore. It is our sincere hope the current crisis will resolve enough to allow us to move forward with the meeting as planned. It is shaping up to be an exciting and dynamic meeting.

The Program Committee has been hard at work reviewing session proposals, and acceptance notifications will go out soon. The [Call for Posters](#) is now open, and [scholarship applications](#) are also available. We have pushed back the scholarship application deadline to June 10, 2020, and notifications will go out in July. We encourage you to plan for the meeting as you would in any other year, though please review and follow the [CDC's guidelines on travel](#). It's also best to not make nonrefundable travel arrangements at this time.

Understanding there are many unknowns in this situation, we have also begun a risk assessment of COVID-19 and the economic implications stemming from it for the Association. For the annual meeting, there are a number of scenarios being considered, including the possibility, if meeting face to face is not safe or feasible, of holding a virtual meeting. These discussions are in early stages, and we are committed to communicating with the membership and meeting attendees about these discussions often and in a timely manner.

We are also developing a longer-term emergency plan for the Association. This plan will cover a number of scenarios, and I imagine by the end of 2020 our section on how to respond to pandemics will be particularly robust.

As oral historians, in these times of social distancing, we've had to reevaluate the how and why of face-to-face interviewing. A number of resources around this issue have been developed that I'd like to share with you.

First, the Association was fortunate to partner with Baylor University's Institute for Oral History to hold a webinar on remote interviewing. If you were unable to attend, we've made available [the recording of the webinar, the slides, and additional resources pulled from the webinar chat, as well as a summary of the webinar's recommendations](#).

The Vermont Folklife Center has also put out helpful [tips on remote interviewing](#), and this week the Oral History Society released substantive [advice on remote interviewing](#). Finally, Sarah Dziejic (who has worn many hats in the Association, including currently serving as co-chair for the Independent Practitioners Task Force) has written an [essay](#) on oral history, immunodeficiency and disability justice. I hope you'll take a moment to read it.

The Association is also working to develop further guidelines and resources around remote interviewing and we hope to distribute these soon. As resources in other areas impacting our community become available, the Association will work to highlight and connect our membership to them. If there are resources you find particularly useful or topics on which you'd like to see more resources, please reach out to the office. If you're interested and available to help us curate resources in a particular area, please let us know.

I'll be in touch soon and regularly. Please stay safe and take care.

# Executive Director's Report

**By Kristine McCusker**

This has been a trying few months for everyone, and we hope you are all staying safe. As we have been hunkered down and working remotely, the Executive Office and the Council have found new ways to serve our membership while at the same time gathering information and building new foundations that will stabilize us in difficult times.

We have conducted or co-conducted two webinars, for example. Thanks again to our friends at the Baylor Institute for Oral History for our co-sponsored and quite timely webinar on remote oral interviewing in early April. Thanks, as well, to our friends at the American Folklore Society for our co-sponsored webinar on Fieldwork and Digital Audio Technology held on May 1. Remember that webinars are always free for our members and can be accessed behind the paywall. We also hope you will sign up for future "check-ins," as some did with OHA President Allison Tracy-Taylor in April.

In the meantime, Kris and Louis, the organization's co-directors, have been gathering information from sources such as the American Council of Learned Societies and other professional, nonprofit societies to make sure we move forward with the least amount of disruption.

We have consulted the ACLS attorney to make sure that the organization is protected legally and financially. This has helped us generate both a risk assessment for the organization as well as a long-term disaster plan that will account not only for pandemics, but for labor strikes, weather disasters and other disruptive activities that could do us harm.

We also have applied for money from humanities organizations, the CARES act and other governmental sources to make sure that any financial hits we take will be weathered by these other sources of aid.

As always, please let us know if there is anything the Executive Office can do to help.