

## CHAPTER 1

### “TALKING WHITE”

#### AN ANTI-OPPRESSION VIEW TOWARD TRANSCRIBING AND ARCHIVING BLACK NARRATORS

**Alissa Rae Funderburk**

Jackson State University (JSU) is a public, historically Black university located in Jackson, Mississippi. Of the nearly one hundred public and private historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, most were founded in the years following the American Civil War, during the period of segregation, and concentrated in the Southern United States. Jackson State began as Natchez Seminary, founded in 1877 in Natchez, Mississippi. Today, however, JSU is a research university with five separate satellite campuses spread across the Jackson metropolitan area, making it one of the largest HBCUs in the country, and one of seven in the state of Mississippi. As the fourth largest institution of higher learning in the state, JSU provides the opportunity for higher education in a large array of fields to not just native Mississippians, but also scholars from around the country and the world. Largely due to a lack of funding, JSU, like most HBCUs, has no established department dedicated to the field of Black or African studies. Although many HBCUs have courses in Black or African studies, besides Howard and Clark Atlanta University, master's or doctorate programs in African studies are nearly nonexistent.<sup>i</sup> In answer to this, Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander in 1968 founded what she called the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People at JSU.

The institute was renamed the Margaret Walker Center (MWC) in 1979 and today serves as an archive and museum “dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of African American history and culture which honors Margaret Walker’s legacy through its archival collections, exhibits, and public programs.”<sup>ii</sup> Housed on JSU’s main campus, the MWC

is open to all and offers exhibitions that highlight the center's collections and the history of the university. It

collect[s] living memories, archival records and personal papers for scholarly use; advocates the preservation [for historic sites] . . . such as, historic 1903 Ayer Hall, which is the oldest structure on the Jackson State University campus and was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977; engages the community through public programs . . . ; and works with other JSU departments . . .

[including its partner the COFO Civil Rights Education Center].<sup>iii</sup>

Specifically, the MWC maintains significant records like the papers and journals of the late Margaret Walker and those of the former US Secretary of Education and JSU alum Roderick Paige, as well as an oral history department with collections dating back to the seventies.

The cultural value of the MWC's oral history collections is inestimable, but, according to its last appraisal, the monetary value of the oral history department, including photographs and other media, was roughly \$228,496. Ranging from current to more than fifty years old, the vast majority of the hundreds of interviews were recorded on either reel-to-reel or cassette tapes, many of which have yet to be digitized. The stories held within the collection are an untapped treasure mine of Black cultural memory in Mississippi. As these oral history interviews are primary sources that are meant to be accessible, discoverable, and understood, their digitization is essential to maintaining the integrity of the MWC as a community institution that is meant to serve students and scholars by making records of historical significance readily available to all attempting to better scholarship in Black studies.<sup>iv</sup> We, as oral historians and archivists dedicated to working in and for the benefit of Black people in America and across the diaspora, must acknowledge that "historical narratives are premised on previous understandings, which are themselves premised on the distribution of archival power," and "these previous understandings have been profoundly shaped by Western conventions and procedures."<sup>v</sup> Anthropologist Michel-

Rolph Trouillot taught that even in light of the power of these Western conventions and procedures and those privileged previous understandings that make up the historical narrative, Black narrators and archivists have their own power that can contribute facts where silences in the archive exist. As Caswell puts it, we can “disrupt this flow of privilege by actively engaging historically marginalized communities in archival collecting, by paying attention to stories we have never heard before, and by creating documentation where none previously existed.”<sup>vi</sup>

As Caswell espoused, “With every record we digitize we are adding to a nuanced story that complicates simplistic and stereotypical views of the community.”<sup>vii</sup> Thus, the primary focus in the MWC digitization plan has been the Piney Woods Country Life School Oral History Collection and its fifty-nine interviews, twenty-eight of which have audible voices while the rest are solely transcripts.<sup>viii</sup> This collection also includes letters from Piney Woods founder Laurence C. Jones; photographs of the Piney Woods farm, post office, bell tower, sporting events, students, faculty, and staff; recordings of commencement, a Piney Woods club meeting, and vesper services; the original oral history questionnaires and biographical sketches of participants; and the manuscripts produced from the project as it was collected between 1972 and 1980. This project culminated in 1982 with the publication of *Piney Woods School: An Oral History* by Dr. Alferdteen Harrison.

As the previous director and oral historian of the MWC, Dr. Harrison had a major part in nearly all of the archive’s early collections, such as *Behind the Veil*, a 1994 partnership with Duke University documenting the African American experience during the Jim Crow era of segregation and disfranchisement. Students from her oral history classes contributed to many of the projects, like *Black Churches in Jackson during Integration*, which collected opinions on the social impact of churches in facilitating racial integration, and *Blacks in Education in Jackson*,

Mississippi, for which they interviewed people in the local community who possessed some in-depth knowledge about student life and events that affected education in the capital city.

Many projects in the collection have their beginnings in the seventies, like *Labor as an Instrument of Social Change*, which contains over fifty interviews from 1975–76 detailing the labor movement’s influence on civil rights in Jackson; a series from 1976–77 that is a recollection of the good old days by senior citizens talking about their achievements and challenges from childhood through the various stages of life; or the *Clinton Project* of 1977, consisting of interviews dealing with the history, causes, and evolution of the rapid growth of Clinton, Mississippi. The center’s *Farish Street Historic District* project, however, has been added to in various stages in 1976–78, 1980–83, 1994, and most recently in 2012–14. It chronicles the history, living conditions, churches, schools, activities, relationships, and institutions of Jackson’s Farish Street neighborhood and, just like our *Women of Courage/Women’s Issues* project on how Black church women united, campaigned for jobs in Jackson, and organized other social, political, and economic activities from 1975 to 1997, it spans decades.

The MWC collection includes a project that records the origins and operation of the state’s Head Start program and its impact on the mobilization of the Black community in Mississippi, as well as another that examines the rich legacy of blues music and the impact of Mississippi blues musicians such as King Edward Antoine, Eddie Cotton Jr., and Dexter Allen. There are also person-specific collections, like one on the life and career of Robert Clark, one of the most influential African American politicians in twentieth-century Mississippi politics, and an in-depth oral history with Mrs. Billie O. Stamps Fuller, widow of the owner of the Stamps Hotel, where Black celebrities visited and performed. There are also more recent projects, such

as a chronicling of Jackson State University history through interviews with JSU legends like former President John A. Peoples, and the Reclaiming Our Origins through Stories project, which is a component of the Sunflower County Systems Change Project. R.O.O.T.S. addresses negative perceptions and narratives about nineteen young men and boys of color from Sunflower County who set out to change those perceptions in their community.

Oral histories have a great capacity for changing perceptions of minorities both in the mainstream and in their unique communities, an accomplishment often aided by the act of transcription. In their research on independent and community archival activity among African and Asian communities in the UK, Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens describe how “most, if not all, community archivists are motivated and prompted to act by the (real or perceived) failure of mainstream heritage organizations to collect, preserve and make accessible collections and histories that properly reflect and accurately represent the stories of all of society.”<sup>ix</sup> Caswell states “given the long trajectory of archival use, in which remnants of the past are preserved in the present for use in the future, the symbolic annihilation marginalized communities face in the archives has far-reaching consequences for both how communities see themselves and how history is written for decades to come.”<sup>x</sup> Because of that, it is all the more important that a community has its hands in the preservation of its own history. Although the MWC cannot escape the fact that we are the “traditional middlemen of the professional archivist and university,”<sup>xi</sup> we are also a Black oral history archive, founded by a Black woman, maintained by a Black oral historian, at an HBCU in a predominantly Black city. This makes us a powerful platform for both this community and the Black voice as a whole. In that sense, we too can be seen as a form of political protest in that our very creation as a center for Black studies back in 1968 was an “attempt to seize the means by which history is written and to correct or amend

dominant stories about the past.”<sup>xii</sup> As the Black community of Mississippi, and Jackson in particular, has a long-standing tradition of political protest for social justice and fair representation in the halls of government, why not continue that in the archives of history as well?

With all of our collections there is a distinct focus on not just preserving the life stories of African Americans young and old, but also specifically recording those of Mississippians, the projects being centered on people and periods related to the university and local history. In creating the center, Margaret Walker attempted to fill the void of missing Black studies in the academy at JSU. In maintaining the center’s archives and producing new oral histories, we continue the work of combating the symbolic annihilation of the Black community, currently grossly underrepresented and trivialized in both the media and the historical record.<sup>xiii</sup> As evidenced in the existing oral history collection, the MWC has relied a great deal on the community, namely JSU students and local narrators, to accomplish this work. Although the MWC is not directly led by the community, it does serve a function similar to that of community archives, which are part of “larger social and political movements whereby groups who have been ignored, misrepresented, or marginalized by mainstream archival repositories launch their own archival projects as means of self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The very act of recording an oral history interview creates an alternative venue for members of the community to “make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them and to control the means through which stories about their past are constructed.”<sup>xv</sup> Unfortunately, many of these interviews are currently relegated to cardboard boxes in back storerooms of the MWC archive because few people know they exist, and they are not easily

accessible. Though listed on the center's website in the sometimes-inaccurate PDFs that serve as finding aids, more than half of these interviews have not been digitized, and most either have incomplete transcriptions from the time of their recording or have not been transcribed at all. Researchers who do happen to know of the MWC's collection and make the time to inquire about specific interviews often must either visit the center or wait an indeterminate amount of time for a transcript to be scanned or for a tape to be digitized for them to listen to it from home. Although many oral historians encourage the use of the original audio, it is no surprise that most researchers, accustomed to using printed and digital texts, prefer to work with interview transcripts whenever possible.

Creating complete and digitized transcripts for these interviews would be a large step toward the increased accessibility desired in the digitization process. Transcription of oral histories, however, is never a very clear-cut or straightforward process, often requiring much thought, negotiation, revision, and, when feasible, narrator involvement to portray the voice of narrators as accurately as possible for future researchers. With limited time and resources, many in similar positions might turn to automated transcription services like Sonix or Trint in an effort to create quick and affordable documents. In a pinch, various apps and software similar to these, either free or for a small price, provide a useful rough draft, especially when an institution cannot find or afford to hire an actual transcriptionist. These services, apps, and software all seem ideal for the ease of producing verbatim transcripts that capture a narrator's every word. However, although automated transcripts can generally save a significant amount of time in the transcription process, they are often unable to pick up on distinct accents, dialects, or slang and thus often require much more revision and audit editing than those originally done by hand.

Although in the current age of remote interviewing the option of automated closed-captioning and transcription is often a partnered service, as in the case of Zoom and Otter.ai, we must recognize that automated transcription is not faultless. Because of their cloud-based services, many tech companies are not always a safe or secure option for adhering to privacy and ethical restraints. They also use unethical labor practices stemming from their reliance on the gig economy and the excessive carbon emissions necessary for cooling the processing devices. For instance, a study released in 2019 by researchers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst showed that simply training the artificial intelligence for natural-language processing in one instance has the same carbon footprint as a cross-country flight.<sup>xvi</sup> Balancing the desire and costs of being ethical with doing what is best for the longevity of a collection is difficult enough at institutions with sufficient funds, but it is even harder for those of us at historically underfunded and minority-focused museums and archives, like HBCUs.

However, it's not solely a matter of money. Caswell said it best when she wrote that "with every collection we digitize we strike a delicate balance between preservation, the wishes of the donor, and practical feasibility."<sup>xvii</sup> As Flinn and Stevens say, "within the context of challenging invisibilities and documenting often difficult or traumatic histories, the archival act," and I argue the act of transcription, "can be highly charged and loaded with emotional as well as political significance – especially when those acts of recovery rescue personal and social, collective histories from deliberate and physical erasure."<sup>xviii</sup> The very decision to transcribe as part of the digitization process at all should be consciously debated as so much may be lost in the act of translating spoken word to written language. Part of this decision-making process should be understanding the ways in which the English language is inextricably linked to the larger saga of British colonialism and the myth of white supremacy, having been used in the history of



America specifically (though also internationally) to delegitimize the voices and agency of Black people. This includes practices like forced illiteracy during slavery, voter suppression tactics that reached a zenith during the Civil Rights Era, and even the code-switching necessary to gain access to halls of academia today.<sup>xix</sup> As an oral historian often transcribing interviews with Black folks about such important topics as their participation in the Civil Rights Movement, I find it is critical that we change the way we think of the transcript as a record and the way we consider dialect and the importance of Ebonics, Black English, or AAVE (African American Vernacular English) in recording American history and culture. If we are going to transcribe the voices of Black people for the sake of preservation and accessibility, then we must do so in a way that honors and most benefits the Black community for both now and the future.

When I first moved from New York City to Jackson, Mississippi, and began thinking about this work of digitization and transcription for the MWC's existing collection, I realized it is more than debating if and when I should leave the *g* off the ends of words like *struggling* in transcripts. It is about thinking of transcripts as an extension of the interview, as another living, breathing part of oral history. Oral historians responsible for archiving have to think outside of the box when it comes to the ideologies of academia and our preconceived notions on the standards of language. We also have to be open-minded enough to not only hear what narrators are saying but also respect their voices, their right to speak, and the importance of not just their words but also how they say them. And then, we have to be sufficiently mindful of the transcription process not just to seek the proper funding for thoughtful human transcription by knowledgeable Black transcriptionists whenever possible, but also to acknowledge that work as an important pedagogical element of fields like Black studies and archival science.

A small part of the respect we owe our Black narrators is identifying them properly. You may have noticed thus far my interchangeable use of the terms *Black* and *African American*, as well as their capitalization. Robert Wachal in 2000 gave a “call to the colors” in his *American Speech* article, “The Capitalization of *Black* and *Native American*,” in which he urged us all to “please capitalize the names of races as a matter of courtesy, logic, and accuracy.”<sup>xx</sup> He referenced 1991 articles in *American Speech* by John Baugh and Geneva Smitherman, two prominent Black linguists, saying, “Surely people’s wishes as to how their own ethnic group is labeled should be the only consideration.”<sup>xxi</sup> He explained these wishes as such:

According to Baugh, *Black* is the term preferred by most Black Americans. As a proper noun, like *Negro* (Spanish for ‘black’) or *African American*, it should be capitalized. The claim that *black* is a color word requiring lowercase makes meaning the major criterion for determining upper versus lower case. However, capitalization is determined by whether a term is a proper noun or not. Surely *Black* is synonymous with *Negro*, just as *White* is synonymous with *Caucasian*. Either they are all proper nouns or none of them is. Like *White*, *Black* is not a color term. If it were, such locutions as *light-skinned Black person* and *dark-skinned White person* would make no sense. Furthermore, when *black* is a color term and part of a proper name, as in *Black Angus*, it is nonetheless capitalized. And one would not think of using the color-word argument to downcase *Mr. Black* or *Ms. White*. The failure to capitalize *Black* when it is synonymous with African American is a matter of unintended racism, to put the best possible face on it.<sup>xxii</sup>

Earlier merit for the case of capitalizing the word *Black* when referencing people of the African diaspora comes from a note in Aida Hurtado’s “Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In explaining the ethnic labels used in her paper, Hurtado says she capitalizes *Black*

following the argument that it refers not merely to skin pigmentation but to a “heritage, a social creation, and often a personal identity in ways at least as meaningful as do ethnic identities which are conventionally capitalized” [see Barry Thorne, Cheri Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, eds., *Language, Gender, and Society*

(Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983), vi]. On the other hand, *white* is left in lowercase letters because it refers not to one ethnic group or to specified ethnic groups but to many.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Our official transcripts, notes, and indexes should all, at the very least, reflect this choice and understanding of Black identity.

The Columbia Center for Oral History Research (CCOHR) *Transcription Style Guide* provides guidance on how to create a great, professional-looking document that would be accepted and expected in any academic or institutional archive in the country. The CCOHR has been collecting and preserving oral history recordings since 1948 when, led by Allan Nevins, it became the world's first institutional home of oral history. Thus, the CCOHR *Transcription Style Guide*, first published in 2018, represents what has been learned over seventy years from Columbia's twenty thousand hours of recorded and transcribed interviews. More than just instructions on when to spell out numbers and where to place commas, the goal of the guide is to "lay out a road map for creating transcripts that are as versatile and broadly accessible as possible," knowing that "it is impossible to make one transcription that is ideal for all uses." The authors assert that the solution to this is to "have a consistent and transparent process."<sup>xxv</sup>

In creating transcripts for the MWC, I personally have relied heavily on the advice of the CCOHR *Transcription Style Guide*. However, oral history transcription cannot always be about creating a professional-looking, acceptable, and broadly accessible document ideal for all uses. Sometimes we owe it to our narrators to be a little more specific and nuanced about the documents we are creating by looking more closely at why and for whom we are creating them. The CCOHR guide does speak to this fact a bit in its section on vernacular: "The diversity of English vernacular is only growing, and the challenge of oral history transcription is to portray this diversity without imposing biases on the text"; the transcript's first priority is "to clearly communicate what speakers intended to say," and the second is "fidelity to the recording and

portraying key characteristics of each individual's speech and thought."<sup>xxvi</sup> The goal of this type of fidelity to the narrator is a transcript that balances a true and faithful rendition of the contents of the interview with a clear portrayal of the narrator's identity and character.

In the case of AAVE, for instance, this also entails the inclusion of elements like body language and non-lexical sounds that are common elements of how Black people express themselves and their personalities. According to the CCOHR *Transcription Style Guide*, "Non-verbal communication may include actions and gestures, affect, and other expressive sounds, as well as notations of modified speech, such as singing."<sup>xxvii</sup> These are all things very common to the way Black folks often talk and, for this reason, the very look of transcripts created for Black narrators will be visibly different from those currently typical at most archives. Transcripts can and should also include anything that provides contextual information or additional important meaning in either a preface or addendum, or sometimes even in the actual text. Given the fact that nonverbal communication is such a large part of the AAVE language, however, finding a clear and concise way to record these nonverbal communications as in-line notations enclosed in brackets throughout a document may be difficult for a single person, particularly one not familiar with AAVE, to do. It would require a balancing act, a certain awareness, and a type of decision-making that might be particularly uncomfortable for white or other non-Black transcriptionists.

Because transcribing oral history is an act of translation between spoken and written language, there are often necessarily many hands involved. Ideally, an oral history record is cocreated during the interview through the exchange of the interviewer and the narrator, but it continues as the transcriptionists, audit editors, project investigator, interviewer, and narrator work together to craft the final document. According to Liz Strong, "Faithful translation of the spoken word to text requires a certain amount of artful compromise. How and whether, to apply

rules of standard written English will depend on the goals of each project, and the preferences of each narrator.”<sup>xxviii</sup> As both the original and revised 2022 version of the CCOHR guide describe, this requires communication throughout the process, and even in displaying the final product, one should both “maintain a consistent approach” and “be as transparent as possible about the methods of that approach so that future readers may clearly interpret the source.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Although speaking and transcribing are not the same as writing, one cannot deny their similarities. In looking for guidance on how to compromise academic writing with accurate transcription, *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, at over a hundred years old, was still a useful tool. The first iteration of this book was written and privately printed by the English professor William Strunk Jr. in 1918, with later versions having been revised by his former student, author E. B. White. However, revisions aside, many of the ideas set forth by Strunk over a century ago not only ring true for writing today but also have applications for the way one should think of transcription and, particularly, the concept of readability.

For instance, in the third chapter Strunk and White say the following about colloquialisms:

If you use a colloquialism, or a slang word or phrase, simply use it; do not draw attention to it by enclosing it in quotation marks. To do so is to put on airs, as though you were inviting the reader to join you in a select society of those who know better.<sup>xxx</sup>

They also later say to “write in a way that comes naturally,” explaining that it is preferable to use “words and phrases that come readily to hand” because the very use of language “begins with imitation” and “it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Although he does admit that this particular approach to style is not without its flaws, he insinuates that in writing—as would I suggest in speech and transcription too—flaws are to be expected. On the use of orthodox spelling, Strunk admits, “The spelling of English words is not fixed and

invariable, nor does it depend on any other authority than general agreement,” explaining that “from time to time new forms, mostly simplifications, are introduced by innovators, and either win their place or die of neglect.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

He says, “The practical objection to unaccepted and oversimplified spellings is the disfavor with which they are received by the reader. They distract his attention and exhaust his patience.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> I posit that within the realm of oral history, part of the job is not only to question who the readers might be but also to in fact push the reader and test their patience because the very subject matter they endeavor to read is not just an essay but the essence of a person’s life. To read an oral history should require some level of effort, at least as much exhaustion of effort as used by the narrators themselves. Strunk and White’s crowning piece of advice on the subject of writing that one might consider relatable to the practice of transcription is to not use dialect “unless your ear is good,” and “if you use dialect, be consistent.” They also say, “The best dialect writers, by and large, are economical of their talents.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Just like any translation, transcription should be ideally done by someone who is fluent in the language they are transcribing. In the case of transcribing Black voices, that most often means someone who is Black would be an ideal transcriptionist because they are more likely to have personal knowledge of the rules that govern AAVE, as well as more familiarity with the terminology and phrases, slang or otherwise, used by the narrator. This, however, is not necessarily always the case. My advice is to follow that of Strunk and White: “Do not attempt to use dialect unless you are a devoted student of the tongue you hope to reproduce.”<sup>xxxv</sup> If you are not familiar with the dialect being spoken in an interview, it is advisable that you instead find a transcriptionist who is. However, although an external perspective is unlikely to be any more helpful, in some cases a non-Black person may be just as knowledgeable or familiar enough

about the narrator or the narrator's community and dialect or regionalisms to transcribe them effectively.

There are many points in *The Elements of Style* that I do not find helpful to the topic of transcription, or indeed necessarily subscribe to in my writing, such as the assertion that we should avoid foreign languages and write in English, particularly because I take offense at the connotations of the word *foreign* in America, a country of immigrants. But, as with much of academia, we take what helps us and disregard what does not. If one can apply these useful practices to the transcription of Black voices, recognizing AAVE as a language or at the very least correctly identifying and transcribing its colloquialisms, a faithful written interpretation of the spoken word may be reached, though it is a struggle.

We continue this uphill battle with transcription because, regardless of methodologies, it has proven over time to be an extremely useful tool for making this particular form of research accessible to broader audiences. For instance, accessibility is important in terms of disability justice work, and, obviously, completed transcripts go a long way toward making oral history more accessible to the deaf and hearing-impaired community. That being said, it is unfair to assume that one should always sacrifice the rights of the narrator for the rights of an anticipated reader. In some cases, the very act of creating a transcript, let alone one that adheres to standardized English and the typically accepted parameters of a professional or academic document, does a disservice to narrators who speak AAVE. This is a difficult, if not impossible, balance in some instances, and thus the decision to transcribe should always be made carefully.

Although in an ideal world a broad accessibility would be an easily attainable goal, in the United States of America, unfortunately, there has been a long history of large swaths of people purposefully refusing to even see Black people living their daily lives as accessible, capable of

being understood or appreciated, at all. Due to the persistence and perseverance of Black people and Black culture and the growing popularity of things like hip-hop music and fashion, this is changing, but there is still a lot of work to be done. Where accessible is typically defined as capable of being understood or appreciated, in the context of today's sociopolitical climate one must ask whether Black people are capable of being understood or appreciated by our oppressors, including an academic or even mainstream audience. The ongoing protests against police brutality and injustice suggest that even still, when Black folks say something like "I can't breathe" or "Black lives matter," many Americans do not seem to hear them. Those responsible for preserving the voices of Black narrators must not simply erase the audible differences that are part of what makes those narrators who they are to accommodate others.

Because of my personal priorities and alignments, my loyalty when transcribing Black voices for the MWC is to my narrator. That is a choice every oral historian must make for themselves based on their priorities or, in some cases, the priorities of the project they have agreed to take part in. An archivist, however, often has little relationship with the original narrator of an oral history interview, particularly those of decades past. This is certainly the case for most of the oral histories I work with in my role at the MWC, save those conducted recently as part of the fiftieth commemoration of the Gibbs Green Tragedy, an instance of police and state violence that resulted in the shooting deaths of two young Black men on JSU's campus in the spring of 1970. Otherwise, it is helpful to understand not just the language a narrator uses but also the history of how that language developed over time and may have been perceived at the time of recording. For instance, many have seen how language has recently been targeted in this country, used as a basis for xenophobia and racism—lately, especially toward Latinx folks and people of Asian descent who have faced physical violence or heard the constant disgruntled



demand to “speak English,” largely due to the forty-fifth president’s words and policies regarding immigration and the coronavirus pandemic.

In many cities and towns throughout this country, there are other languages widely spoken and used, so why do we prioritize a single standard of English, particularly in writing for research and academia? We might again say it’s just a matter of accessibility, that we want the greatest number of people to be able to read and understand our work, though, historically, much of academic writing has been inaccessible for the common person regardless of their fluency in English. Particularly in oral history, we talk a lot about bringing marginalized perspectives into the greater historical record, making those narratives available to a wider audience. But access cannot be the only goal of oral history. Demanding that academic or historical documents such as an oral history be transcribed into a standardized English seems tantamount to kowtowing to the demand for ethnic minorities to speak English. For this reason, it is always refreshing to see projects that seek interviewees fluent in the languages of their narrators. This obviously is not always possible, and I myself have conducted many interviews in English, where that was the second or even third language of my narrator. I have known oral historians who have had to use translators in their interviews as well. Though not ideal, this is a common practice where necessary. Either way, the interview is, eventually, transcribed in the language it was recorded in and only then, when needed, translated for the appropriate audiences. Similar considerations should undoubtedly be made for those interviews conducted with narrators speaking AAVE.

John McWhorter, American linguist and associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, explains how “speech can communicate identity as well as ideas: How people talk reflects how they perceive themselves within a society.” In terms of the speech of Black folks, he says, “On first being brought to the United States, African slaves

tended not to ever learn English fully. Their children were more familiar with native English, but also developed an in-group way of speaking that retained some of the traits of how the people who had raised them spoke.” His description of the origins of AAVE both clarifies and justifies not only why it exists but also why it should be recognized and recorded. Where a Black person today might use a sentence like, “Why she say he the only one?” instead of the standard, “Why does she say that he is the only one?” leaving out the *does*, *that*, and *is*, according to McWhorter, is how “Black English just salutes, as it were, the founders of the black American population.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

African American Vernacular English is the “proper” title for Ebonics, a combination of *ebony* and *phonics*, referring to the way English is most often generally spoken within Black communities throughout America (most typically to and with other African American people). For non-POC or those from predominantly white communities, AAVE most often appears in television and music, usually as a signifier of socioeconomic status and racial affiliation in hip-hop culture, for instance. One could say that AAVE is mostly a more relaxed and expedient version of American English (which in itself is often considered a simplification of British English, which is an amalgamation of various European languages over the course of centuries). But the roots of AAVE go deeper than just etymology, and its use is rarely ever a superficial choice but rather a signifier for so much more of a person’s identity than the laziness often ascribed to it. Before beginning the transcription process for my first project at the MWC, the Gibbs Green interviews, I had to determine whether the use of accents, language, slang, or dialect is discussed in the body of these five interviews, or whether each of these elder, college-educated, Black narrators in some other way mentioned if, why, or how the way they speak matters to them. This strategy worked especially well for one of these, an interview with narrator

Nettie Stowers, who spoke a great deal about the importance of education and enunciation in the body of her interview, thus guiding me on how best to treat grammar in her transcript.

Interviewers ought to acknowledge that this may be just as important as the subject of the interview because it is a part of identity.

For an example of how Black identities present themselves in the work of oral history, one need not look further than Isabel Wilkerson's stunning Pulitzer Prize-winning tome, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Divided into five parts, Wilkerson's work traverses the exodus of six million Black souls out of the South over the course of fifty-five years known as the Great Migration by following the life stories of three individuals, Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. In it, Wilkerson sheds light on the elements of respectability that have long cast a shadow on the representation of Black folk in life and literature. We see it in the way Pershing sheds the name given to him by his mother in the South for the new, modern, and hip identity the name Bob could provide in California. We also see it in the difference in speech and dialect between farmers Ida Mae and George and Doctor Bob as quoted by Wilkerson. The life each narrator goes on to live is invariably impacted by their willingness and ability to not only leave the South but also cleave to respectability. Wilkerson does due service to their memories by recording and portraying them as they were and, in the process, does the reader the service of educating them on this truth as well.

Not all Black people will speak using AAVE in the setting of an interview, some preferring instead to present a similar type of respectability as portrayed in Wilkerson's writing. Especially in considering interviews from decades past, such as those in some of the older projects of the MWC collections for which narrators may no longer be alive or able to be

consulted, we should not assume that the narrator's spoken voice always reflects them being their true, most authentic selves in the space of the actual interview. Who they were talking to, and how they might be code-switching with their interviewer, might greatly impact their manner of speech. In the case of many of the MWC oral histories, I suspect that the notion of being recorded by an educator or academic associated with Jackson State University impressed upon many narrators the desire to present themselves in an official and respectable manner. If the narrator has given their knowing consent to be interviewed and agreed to be recorded, we can only assume they are speaking as they wish to be remembered unless they state otherwise. In either event, a short biographical note on the interviewer either in the preface or in an addendum could provide contextual information for future readers to better understand the interviewer/narrator dynamic.

That being said, whenever possible narrators should have control over their voices. This can be in the form of final approval of their transcript or some inclusion in the transcription process, such as either the ability to fully edit or the option to correct or omit particular things said. It should include ongoing informed consent in which the narrator is made fully aware of the purpose and audience of the interview. They might also be given the opportunity to agree to their interviewer and perhaps even request a Black person if that would make them feel more comfortable. If a project is based in or geared toward the Black community, it is worth considering where in the process Black people have been consulted. When it comes to transcribing Black voices, perhaps it is possible to hire a Black transcriptionist or at least a Black person for audit editing. Those leading the digitization efforts of Black stories should consider what it would take and what would it look like to hire or consult someone Black.

There are questions that oral historians and archivists concerned with the preservation or digitization of oral histories should ask themselves. Is a full transcript completely necessary? Could a good in-depth index suffice? What is the proposed use for the transcript? Although she did not create a traditional oral history, Margaret Walker did, in a sense, interview her grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, to collect the story of her family for Walker's seminal historical novel *Jubilee*. Walker explains in her book *How I Wrote Jubilee* that the novel was based on the life of her maternal great-grandmother, Margaret Duggans Ware Brown. Though she did take notes and journal extensively throughout her writing the book, there is no existing transcript of the conversations she had with her grandmother. Instead, rather than a novel based solely on the oral tradition, *Jubilee* is also the product of ten years of research into historical documents.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Though the materials she produced throughout the process are valuable to researchers even now, the book was the goal, and her family's place in the historical record does not suffer for lack of a complete transcript. When interviewed on this subject by Charles Rowell, Walker said,

I wanted to tell the story that my grandmother had told me, and to set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and Reconstruction. I believe that the role of the novelist can be, and largely is for me, the role of a historian. More people will read fiction than will history, and history is slanted just as fiction may seem to be. People will learn about a time and a place through a historical novel.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In this way, Walker used fiction to transcend the boundaries of what one might consider the proper history and academic frameworks, even standardized English, to tell her family's story, a Black story, in a way that was authentic to her.

Consider what is authentic to you, to your narrator, and to the narrative itself. Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* is quite possibly the clearest and most present example for how I view not only the subject of transcribing Black voices but also the fidelity of oral history. Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston hailed from Eatonville, Florida, a community incorporated in 1887, that was one of the first self-governing all-Black municipalities in the United States. Trained at Barnard and Columbia University from 1925 to 1930, Hurston was an author and collector of Black folklore. In 1927, she traveled to Plateau, Alabama, to interview eighty-six-year-old Oluale Kossola, aka Cudjo Lewis, a survivor of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship to illegally make the transatlantic journey in 1859. The story Hurston collected from Kossola was an epic tale of the atrocities African peoples inflicted on each other, the loneliness of a captive in a strange land, and the inexhaustible yet extraordinary wonder of life.

In her introduction to the book, editor Deborah G. Plant explains how "Kossola hoped the story he entrusted to Hurston would reach his people, for whom he was still lonely." She also notes that for Hurston, "the dialect was a vital and authenticating feature of the narrative," so much so that she would not submit to the revisions necessitated by publishers to have the book released. Hurston instead had "found a way to produce a written text that maintains the orality of the spoken word,"<sup>xl</sup> which she did, I posit, because that was what her narrator asked of her. Just nineteen pages into the book, readers find that after Hurston calls him by his name and tells him what she wants to know, Kossola responds and says, "I want you everywhere you go to tell whut Cudjo say."<sup>xli</sup> He asks not that Hurston tell his story, or explain what happened, but simply that she "tell whut Cudjo say." As an anthropologist, an oral historian, and a Black woman, Hurston was faithful to her narrator's requests and his words as well as to her own voice as a writer.

Also modeled by Hurston's book and indeed much of her other work is the lesson that interpretation and presentation of the words of our narrators should include a great effort toward transparency. In her preface to *Barracoon*, Hurston gives a clear and concise explanation of her purpose and methodology for collecting this history and writing the book. Likewise, current-day oral historians, transcriptionists, archivists, and the like can provide similar information in their physical documentation of interviews, explaining their own impact on how history is being recorded. For instance, the preface of a transcript could include how and why the interview was transcribed, for what specific purpose, and by whom. One might consider crafting an explanation or disclaimer to attach to a project or specific interview for the benefit of future researchers, perhaps even the actual project blueprint, similar to how a word list is often created at the time of the interview to be provided to a future transcriptionist.

In conclusion, relegating Black folks to the written word, after a history of griots and generations of oral tradition, does a disservice to the community as a whole. We are so much more than what can be captured on a page, especially when translated to a standardized English that lacks the color and flavor of the spoken word as it is expressed through AAVE. If it must be written and transcribed for the sake of accessibility and preservation, let it be done with all due care, by those who speak that same tongue and have the heart and desire to respect the intentions of the narrator and represent their brethren faithfully. At least in this regard, we as a community may be masters of both our own history and our destiny. Because, as Trouillot teaches and Caswell reminds us, "Silences in history are compounded by archival omissions; power drives which events become records, which records become archives, which archives become narratives, and which narratives become histories."<sup>xlii</sup>

## NOTES

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