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“Now, What’s One Story I Wanted to Tell You?”: Oral History Exhibition Archives at the Chicago History Museum at the Turn of the 21st Century

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Abstract: Starting in the 1970s, American history museums have undergone a shift away from seeing themselves collections-focused historical societies acting as “temples to the past.” In the face of broader political challenges—civil rights, increasingly multicultural urban audiences, and the “culture wars” of the 1980s, public historians have sought to reclaim their institutions’ relevance by seeking to share their authority and mission with those “publics” they serve.

While secondary literature on public history has generally agreed that museums pulled off this shift—and museums themselves have touted successful exhibits and outreach—this essay uses a specific case study to complicate the narrative. The Chicago History Museum, a metropolitan history museum founded in 1856 as the Chicago Historical Society, turned to oral history as both a collecting and a community engagement practice in the 1990s and early 2000s. At a moment of museological transition, the museum sought to match its city’s transition towards multiculturalism. This essay reads oral history archives created by the museum in a new light: within their material history as collections. I argue that the oral history archives of CHS’s exhibition projects are valuable sources not just of the urban history the museum intended to capture but also the institutional history of public museums themselves. This method suggests new paths forward for understanding public history strategies and community history.

Introduction and historiography¹

Starting in the 1970s, American history museums have undergone a museological shift from seeing themselves collections-focused historical societies acting as “temples to the past” to a newer, increasingly social mission. In the face of broader political challenges—civil rights, increasingly multicultural urban audiences, and the “culture wars” of the 1980s, public historians have sought to reclaim their institutions’ relevance by seeking to share their authority and mission with those “publics” they serve.² While the American Association of Museums argued that “the values museums represent strike a responsive chord for people living in this time of enormous and accelerating change” in 1984, though, that public resonance did not come automatically.³ Historians of museums write that museums had to fight against their own reputations as institutions founded to educate the public on their “authentic” and patriotic heritage—a reputation that audiences were increasingly distrusting.⁴

In this essay, I use an archive biography approach to offer a case study of one museum’s strategy during this period of change. The Chicago History Museum, a metropolitan history museum founded in 1856 as the Chicago Historical Society, turned to oral history as both a collecting and a community engagement practice in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a museum at a moment of transition seeking to match a city at a moment of demographic transition towards

¹ This article has benefitted from the comments and assistance of Dr. Alice Goff at the University of Chicago, for whose class on *The Archive in History* this paper was originally written; Dr. Peter Alter at the Chicago History Museum, who provided both mentorship and discussion of oral history work at the museum; and the anonymous reviewers.

² Catherine M. Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History: The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 5.

³ Commission on Museums for a New Century, “Museums for a New Century” (American Association of Museums, December 1983), 3.

⁴ James B. Gardner, “Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (September 1, 2004): 11–21, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2004.26.4.11>.

multiethnicity and multiculturalism, this institution provides insight into the ways public history as a field navigated new practices, to ambivalent success.

The Chicago Historical Society (CHS) was created in 1856 as a historical library and club for an elite group of founders. As it has grown into its current incarnation, the Chicago History Museum (CHM),⁵ the museum has necessarily had to adapt to changing museological trends. Through the latter half of the 20th century, CHS increasingly has focused in on urban history rather than state and national; positioned itself as a community museum representing a broad, diverse swathe of Chicago; and sought to create “blockbuster” exhibitions appealing to the visitor- and member- based model of support that replaced a few wealthy donors.⁶ From the 1980s through the 2000s, the museum’s oral history work became a key part of this mission. At the turn of the 21st century, the museum began conducting large-scale oral history projects as part of its research process for new exhibitions. Starting in 1992, CHS collected oral histories in four Chicago neighborhoods (Grand Boulevard/Bronzeville, Rogers Park, Pilsen, and East Garfield Park) as part of the *Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture* project that later became the *Out of the Loop: Neighborhood Voices* exhibition in 2001. In a contrast to the downtown “Loop,” these four neighborhoods reflected some of the most diverse community areas in the city, including the historic South Side “Black metropolis” of Grand Boulevard/Bronzeville, one of Chicago’s most ethnically diverse North Side neighborhoods in Rogers Park, the historically working-class and Latino West Side neighborhood of Pilsen, and the majority-Black West Side

⁵ The museum formally changed its name from the Chicago Historical Society (CHS) to the Chicago History Museum (CHM) in 2006. While nearly all oral history interviews covered in this paper were conducted before 2006 under the purview of CHS, the exhibits and project archives have had longer lifespans, which have extended into the institution’s time as CHM. Throughout this paper, I refer to the institution as it was called at the time of a given record’s creation or reuse.

⁶ Catherine M. Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History: The Chicago Historical Society and the Transformation of an American Museum* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 34.

neighborhood of East Garfield Park. Later, the museum formed a Teen Council of Chicago youth who spent three years interviewing narrators for the Teen Chicago exhibition that opened in 2004; the Teen Council members would also continue conducting interviews used in later, non-teen-focused exhibitions for CHM. These oral history projects generated manuscript collections now archived at CHM, including not only interview transcripts and recordings but also extensive supporting materials such as consent forms, prepared question lists, interviewer notes, and publicity materials.

For CHS, oral history was valuable both because of its product (historical knowledge and exhibits) and its process (interviewing and navigating relationships between the museum and Chicago communities). On the one hand, oral histories were key to the research process that recorded new aspects of urban history and fueled innovative new exhibits like *Neighborhoods* and *Teen Chicago*. These exhibits attracted new audiences to the museum, supporting CHS during a time of uncertainty in the museum field. On the other hand, committing to oral history projects in the first place signaled the museum's commitment to community partnerships and history. By highlighting Chicagoan community members as narrators of their personal stories, the museum actively negotiated its interpretive authority and sought to justify its role as a repository for diverse Chicago histories.

By examining these oral history collections holistically as an archival institution, I argue that the oral history archives of CHS's exhibition projects are valuable sources not just of the urban history the museum intended to capture during the turn of the 21st century, but also the institutional history of the public museum itself. I borrow the concept of "archival biography" from material historians, who have used it to understand the ways that the material culture of the archive is generated over time by the lived experience of people working on and being captured

by the archive.⁷ These more focused biographies complicate institution-centered histories to understanding archiving itself as a uncertain process. Records beyond and surrounding the interviews themselves make visible a contested, trust-building process through which an elite museum attempted to pivot towards community histories. They reveal a tension between the medium of oral history and the medium of the archive, especially in how each tool of historical knowledge makes claims to authority and authenticity. As CHS collected, mobilized, and preserved oral histories, the archives captured ongoing museum negotiations about trust and interpretation; examining the oral history archives as an institution complicates the success story presented by the oral history-based exhibits.

The allure of the oral history archive

For CHS, turning to oral history was a strategic institutional decision, not a purely academic and historiographical one. By the 1970s, trends in the museum field necessitated major changes to CHS's direction. Funding was a major motivator. The Gilded Age Old Chicago fortunes of industrial philanthropists and CHS founders like Potter Palmer and Robert McCormick had passed to later generations who were less willing to direct their efforts towards sustaining an elite historical club. Instead, CHS now had to rely on visitors and members as a matter of institutional survival.⁸ To distinguish itself from other museums, CHS increasingly focused on Chicago's urban history, leveraging its access to the city and the specificity of the niche in which it could produce new, publicized "blockbuster" exhibitions that would drive ticketed attendance. It also had to appeal to a demographically shifting Chicago, as consultants wrote in a 1983 study: "Chicago is now a black city... yet that fact of life is reflected neither in

⁷ John Randolph. "On the Biography of the Bakunin Family Archive." In *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 210.

⁸ Lewis, 17.

the existing collections nor in present collecting strategies.”⁹ To attract increasingly diverse Chicagoan communities as visitors and members and to limit the budgetary load of acquisitions, CHS committed to creating exhibitions that reflected contemporary history and to collecting strategically to support exhibition development in its 1984 Statement of Collecting Scope and 1989 Mission Statement.¹⁰ This exhibition strategy was paired with a renewed emphasis on outreach along three lines: increased publicity for exhibitions, expanded educational resources and programs, and prioritized community engagement. Together, exhibitions and outreach built a strategy to sustain CHS via more diverse attendance and engagement.

At the same time, community history was on the rise museologically. Community public history institutions, like the DuSable Museum founded on the South Side in 1961 by Margaret Burroughs, created a rich legacy of Chicago racial history.¹¹ Grant institutions like the National Endowment for the Humanities (established in 1965) and the Joyce Foundation in Chicago also put increasing pressure on public history to follow academic history’s move towards dealing “directly with issues of pluralism” culturally, as the Joyce Foundation wrote in a 1992 call for proposals for Chicago-area institutions.¹² These grants also became crucial to CHS solving its funding problem. CHS framed its pivot towards community history as germane to its institutional legacy of working for social change. As founded, CHS conceived of its goal as educating new immigrants to Chicago and shaping the citizenry through history.¹³ Despite the paternalistic slant to this traditional institutional self-conception, the new 1980s mission that focused on

⁹ Lewis, 24.

¹⁰ Lewis, 28.

¹¹ Tempestt Hazel, “Don’t It Always Seem to Go: On the Loss and Capture of Black (Re)Collections,” ed. Stephen D. Booth and Stacie Williams, *Loss/Capture 1: The State of Black Cultural Archives*, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://losscaptureproject.cargo.site/Don-t-It-Always-Seem-to-Go-On-the-Loss-and-Capture-of-Black-re>.

¹² Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 104.

¹³ Elena Gonzales, *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, Museum Meanings 25 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 35.

contemporary urban history retained the focus on a Chicago audience, now oriented towards social *justice* specifically rather than social *change* more broadly.

Oral history projects seemed to fit well within the museum's new goals. They could be collected locally by CHS staff; provide narrators and their networks a personal link to the museum as an institution that would drive attendance and authority; and capture multicultural, specific histories to support exhibits focusing on community history. During these decades, oral history became increasingly valued for its sense of authenticity.¹⁴ Narrators were privileged as authorities on their own stories, told in their own voices, which aligned well with CHS's strategic plan claiming that "the interpretation of history is too important to be left exclusively to professional historians. CHS provides a physical and intellectual environment where everyone who is interested in history... should have the opportunity to study the evidence of Chicago's past and draw his or her own conclusions."¹⁵ Technologically, the computer-driven laserdisc also allowed oral histories to be brought into exhibitions in the 1980s through a reliable in-gallery playback method that could also be made interactive, such as through a touch screen.¹⁶ These museological and historiographical trends would come together in an experimental new CHS project, *Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture*, in which the museum committed itself extensively to oral history research and community engagement in its interpretive process.

Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture (1992–1999)

The *Neighborhoods* project's commitment to oral history ran deep, beginning with its funding source. CHS had proposed the project as part of acquiring a 1992 Joyce Foundation

¹⁴ Carolyn Hamilton, "'Living by Fluidity': Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 215.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 32.

¹⁶ Selma Thomas, "Private Memory in a Public Space: Oral History and Museums," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, *Critical Perspectives on the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 89.

grant that committed CHS to collect new materials for the museum and archive focusing on a multicultural, underrepresented group within museums, with the explicit collaboration of the community group in the process of planning, implementation, and programming. Oral histories and transcripts comprised interviews conducted in four neighborhoods (Douglas/Grand Boulevard, Rogers Park/West Ridge, Pilsen/Little Village, and Near West Side/East Garfield Park) as well as video- and audio-recorded community meetings during which committees of community members and CHS staff made major interpretive decisions about the research and exhibition. From the start, the research and oral history gathering was seen as crucial to the project as a whole—in fact, the project had begun as primarily a documentation project but only later, partway through the Douglas/Grand Boulevard planning, expanded into being primarily an exhibition series.¹⁷ Interactives, videos, and label text used the information gathered through this oral history-based research process in the final exhibition.

The process of forming committees and gathering oral histories was carefully calculated to align with the authority-sharing, progressive nature of the project. On the CHS staff side, the museum made an effort to fill committees with non-curatorial staff (eg. designers and educators) as well as curators who had traditionally held authority over exhibition planning; conducted antiracism workshops and a brown-bag lunch series to equip staff with leadership and sensitivity skills; and brought on outside academic advisor/coordinator Tracye Matthews, a Ph.D. candidate in American history with experience in community organizing, to bolster the project's organization.¹⁸ On the resident side,¹⁹ the museum worked to recruit committee members who

¹⁷ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 104.

¹⁸ Lewis, 105.

¹⁹ In this paper, I use “resident” and “community member” to refer generally to non-CHS-staff Chicagoans engaged in oral history projects. I use “committee member” and “narrator” to refer to specific roles in the process of oral history interviewing and exhibition development; “committee member” refers to those involved in the planning

were intended to attend community meetings that would cover all parts of the exhibition process, from suggesting initial themes to participating in oral history interviews to advertising the final exhibit.²⁰ The staff and residents combined into mixed committees for each of the four neighborhood projects, and many of the committee members became narrators of oral histories. A given oral history would start with a pre-written questionnaire of possible topics, then generate a recording and transcript along with release forms signed by the narrator (the resident who narrated their own life history), comments and note sheets written by the interviewer (CHS staff or students from Loyola University in Rogers Park)²¹ immediately after the interview about the experience, and index sheets generated after transcription to create lists of topics covered, plus page numbers.²² Overall, the process was intended to be highly participatory and highly documented.

Sharing interpretive authority was a major shift for CHS. Recording oral histories for the purposes of placing them in an exhibit confronted curators with the immediacy and authenticity of a real Chicago resident, talking about their own experience, shaped by their own interpretation and reflection.²³ This was compelling, but it also challenged curatorial staff. Decisionmaking committees had to make contact with organizations and individuals without previous relationships to CHS, coordinate meetings and interviews in neighborhoods CHS staff were

process and community meetings, and “narrator” refers to someone interviewed for an oral history. Many committee members also became narrators of their own oral histories.

²⁰ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 107.

²¹ Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture summary, 2002.0131.1, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society), ARCHIE.

²² Ernest Gates checklist, November 5, 1997, 2002.131, Box 2, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

²³ Thomas, “Private Memory in a Public Space,” 90.

unfamiliar with, abide by community members' recommendations for exhibit focus, and work within the constraints of what narrators were willing to discuss with museum interviewers.²⁴

The museum worked extensively with community activists and academic urban historians to recruit oral history narrators and committee members, with varied rates of success. For example, CHS relied heavily on project coordinator Tracye Matthews and longtime staff archivist Archie Motley, who were both Black, in outreach with Douglas/Grand Boulevard organizations. Connecting with and utilizing the networks of “community gatekeepers” who were highly involved in grassroots organizations, such as Timuel D. Black, also became crucial—Black also became an oral history narrator for the project.²⁵ The outreach efforts enabled the oral history archive to be created in the first place—oral history requires narrators—but was still a fraught process. Where CHS had fewer connections, such as to the Orthodox Jewish, Jamaican, and Mexican communities in Rogers Park compared to the white communities, there were major gaps. Additionally, many narrators and community members were reluctant to fully share their experiences, limited by logistics (night jobs overlapped with scheduled meetings), language barriers (Latino participants cited feeling spoken over often), and discomfort with staff and other committee members.²⁶ CHS had to build trust before and during its oral history research process.

The manuscript collections capture this tension between the museum's outreach efforts and its critical historiographical efforts—between oral histories as unfiltered recollection and oral histories as public records. The production of oral histories relied on both narrators' and the

²⁴ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 107.

²⁵ Timuel D. Black, a longtime resident of Bronzeville, was an African-American historian of Chicago and the US in his own right as well as an active participant in Black Chicagoan community organizer with ties to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Obama, among others. See Lewis, 106.

²⁶ Lewis, 109.

museum's willingness to "allow their private memories to become public history."²⁷ Prewritten question lists for interviews included along transcripts in the archive expose the process of historiographical interpretation that happened alongside simply recording historical facts. Interviewers asked, "Why do you think people like Studs Terkel or the Chicago Historical Society... are interested in interviewing you? What will you leave for posterity?"²⁸ and "What message would you like the exhibition on the West Side opening at the Chicago Historical Society on November 16, 1997 to convey to the public?"²⁹ pushing narrators not just to tell their stories but to analyze them through the institutional lens of CHS. At the same time, CHS interviewers left their own perspective in the archive via "interviewer's notes" sheets, at times minimizing the value of narrators' history, such as one which argues, "I question the usefulness of this tape for the CHS except for some isolated events, and even then, I would suggest some verification. For me, though, it was a delightful and informative opportunity to sit and listen to a woman that firmly believed that folks at the grass roots level could make a difference."³⁰ This interviewer highlighted the personal perspective ("firm belief") of the narrator yet did not acknowledge it as historically valuable. In the archive, the contrast between how narrators historicized their stories and how CHS did—even within the same folder—creates a record of a fraught process of authority sharing and history making.

²⁷ Thomas, "Private Memory in a Public Space," 98.

²⁸ Studs Terkel was an oral historian and "guerilla journalist" widely known for his local radio program that aired oral histories with local Chicagoans. He worked closely with CHS, and today the oral history center bears his name, though he was not an interviewer for the Neighborhoods project. See Florence Scala interview, November 7, 1997, 2002.131, Box 2, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

²⁹ Florence Scala oral history questionnaire, November 7, 1997, 2002.131, Box 2, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

³⁰ Brenatta Howell Barrett interviewer's notes and word list, November 5, 1997, Box 2, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

In this contestation, CHS ultimately did not universally cede its interpretive authority. This is perhaps best highlighted by cases in which narrators discussed contemporary, controversial, “difficult histories.” Asked by an interviewer, “We talked a little about the Black metropolis and... what kind of negative things made this neighborhood [Bronzeville/Grand Boulevard] possible?” narrator Timuel D. Black stated frankly, “That’s racism you are talking about. You see, in that period of time, we knew, without anyone writing it into law, that if we came on the east side of Cottage Grove, you might get arrested.”³¹ But curators did not necessarily translate the archived oral histories, ostensibly key sources of research, into the exhibition. Douglas/Grand Boulevard curator Olivia Mahoney argued, “for the first go around of their history... I just didn’t feel like we could get too in depth.”³² Topics including racism, gangs, and residents who made money in informal/illegal markets are captured in transcribed interviews, but this archival research did not make it to the exhibition.

CHS felt pressure to selectively use oral histories to celebrate multicultural neighborhoods in order to avoid losing the trust of narrators and community members (“*their* history”), but in doing so elided narrators’ ability to interpret their own history. Selective mobilization of the archive points to a tension between oral history and archive as sites of historical meaning making: while proponents for oral history stressed its authenticity, that authenticity became trapped in archival structures and did not get publicly used. Archives’ “strong documentary bias” treated oral histories as simply collections of facts and recollections that could be used to additively “augment written ‘white’ sources with recorded oral ‘black’ sources within old institutional frameworks” when the research phase ended and CHS staff took

³¹ Tim D. Black interview, February 1995, 2002.131, Box 1, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

³² Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 110.

on more authority in the exhibit planning process.³³ The mismatch between what was archived and what was exhibited, therefore, pointed to a practice of regarding oral histories with the “status of sources... not really ‘histories,’ and they are consigned to archives”—narrators were not conceived of as oral *historians*, as their critical analysis of their neighborhoods was at times overwritten by CHS.³⁴ While the exhibit presented a rosier view of neighborhoods and the success story of the project, the material that was “consigned to archives” provides a more nuanced view.

The inexperience of CHS staff with community outreach and oral history, as well as the fragile trust of narrators, is also captured archivally by the consent forms filed alongside transcripts of interviews. These standardized forms are intended to constitute permission to record an interview and offer the narrator two options: granting CHS copyright and literary rights to their oral history for the Neighborhoods exhibition and future research center use, or retaining their own copyright to the recording and transcript. In many Neighborhoods cases, oral history interviews were fully conducted and transcribed but are rendered unreproducible and un-digitizable by their consent form status—over half the archived transcripts lack a signature, have neither of the two options checked, or even lack a consent form altogether.³⁵ In cases of incomplete forms, such as those with the narrators’ names but not their signatures, consent forms may have been presented before an interview, and a narrator may have declined to sign after the interview based on how the conversation developed.³⁶ These testify to ways in which CHS project staff did not fully succeed at building trust with narrators. At the same time, the inclusion

³³ Hamilton, “‘Living by Fluidity’: Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving,” 225.

³⁴ Hamilton, 215.

³⁵ Oral History Interview Release and Donation Form, 1997, 2002.131, Box 1, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

³⁶ Peter Alter (former CHM archivist and current director of the Studs Terkel Center for Oral History at CHM) in discussion with the author, February 2023.

of these consent-form-less transcripts in the archival collection underscores some of the reasoning for the lack of trust: at CHS, the research center is closely integrated with the museum such that oral history consent forms are treated as deeds of gift.³⁷ For records of an oral history interview to be retained by the research center without a confirmed signed consent form is, in a way, a violation of this trust, preserving these narrators' stories with dubious permission. Therefore, both the exclusion of material from archival authority (via transcripts and questionnaires) and the inclusion of material in archival structures (via consent forms) demonstrate contested, incomplete processes of trust and authority between CHS and oral history narrators.

In the final Neighborhoods exhibit, compromises made in this authority-sharing process did become visible. Reviews commented that “there was no attention to chronology, even within the individual stations... Ethnic succession and multicultural diversity were clearly represented throughout, but sequence and context—touchstones for historians—were entirely absent.”³⁸ Unsure of how to truly share authority over the historical narrative between narrators and the CHS, the exhibit in some ways concluded by eliding any narrative at all, to the chagrin of visitors and reviewers. From within the museum field, Margaret Burroughs of the DuSable Museum initially expressed concern that Neighborhoods encroached on the mission and scope of the DuSable. The DuSable, a community museum founded by longtime Chicagoan and arts organizer Burroughs, had focused on African-American history and culture in Washington Park since its founding (long before CHS staffers began attending their antiracism workshops for Neighborhoods).³⁹ At the African American Museums Association conference, Burroughs

³⁷ Alter interview, February 2023.

³⁸ Thomas J. Jablonsky, review of *Review of Neighborhoods: Keepers of the Culture*, by Scott La France et al., *The Public Historian* 19, no. 4 (1997): 94–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379510>.

³⁹ Hazel, “Don’t It Always Seem to Go.”

expressed concern that CHS duplicated the mission and programming of the DuSable: “I fear that when this project goes public it will be interpreted by the African-American community as an instrument to undermine DuSable Museum, consciously or not.”⁴⁰

However, some compromises did move the exhibit and its archival afterlife towards a more genuine process of sharing. Conflict with the DuSable partially resolved when the Douglas/Grand Boulevard portion of the exhibit eventually moved to be hosted at the Washington Park museum.⁴¹ By viewing exhibition as an alternative process of archival use, the relocation of the exhibit can be seen as an attempt at post-custodialism, transferring control of the CHS’s product into the geographical community of its narrators. Again, though, the mismatch between what the museum thought of as “community” (the DuSable and its curators) and what the archive actually reflected (the narrators themselves and the actual population of Douglas/Grand Boulevard/Bronzeville) resulted in tension. While Irish Catholics, Protestants, and German Jews had played roles in the area’s history before 1920, the museological niche of the DuSable led its curator Ramon Price to remove biographies of white early residents from its version of Neighborhoods, indicating that local control did not necessarily include a commitment to multiculturalism or to community as geographically defined.⁴² This exposed the constructedness of a CHS commitment to “community” histories—because the Neighborhoods project had taken for granted that neighborhood geography, rather than race, faith, or any other

⁴⁰ African American Museums Association president John Fleming drew attention to the material consequences in terms of funding and the relative visibility of community museums in the eyes of major grant foundations, noting, “I think it’s a shame that a large mainstream museum can go to a foundation or large corporation and get \$1 million to do a black history or black art exhibit, while we go to the same people and somehow they don’t think we can do the job the mainstream museum can.” CHS received \$175,000 each from the Joyce Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation across the project. See Charles Storch, “Museums in an Ethnic Turf Battle,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 14, 1994.

⁴¹ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 112.

⁴² Lewis, 112.

axis of self-organization, would define “communities,” the “community archive” of oral histories in fact did not necessarily represent either what the local museums or the narrators themselves considered their communities—something the archive was ill-equipped to handle except by further removal of material.⁴³

Ultimately, the oral history project conducted for Neighborhoods generated an exhibit that was broadly well-received and a model of authority sharing that CHS would apply to future projects into the 2000s. The museum forged ongoing connections with community organizations like the DuSable as well as individual narrators across the city. However, the oral histories themselves resist the exhibit’s more triumphal “multicultural” narrative in a way most visible in the archives, in places where personal narratives and voices contrasted most with the organizational structures of archiving—unsigned consent forms, contrasts between questionnaires and interview evaluations, and collapsed collections.

Teen Chicago (2001–2005)

CHS would continue to commit itself to oral history-based exhibitions following the Neighborhoods model. The next major development in its authority-sharing efforts, as mediated by oral histories, came in the form of Teen Chicago. This exhibit would focus on gathering histories of teen life throughout the 20th century by engaging a Teen Council of 15 Chicago high school students. Many elements from Neighborhoods were retained: the Teen Council echoed the community committee model, the museum planned to conduct oral histories as the research base for the understudied history of teen life and historical impact, and Neighborhoods project coordinator Tracye Matthews even returned to CHS for the project.⁴⁴

⁴³ Jarrett M. Drake, “Seismic Shifts: On Archival Fact and Fictions,” *Sustainable Futures* (blog), August 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/seismic-shifts-on-archival-fact-and-fictions-6db4d5c655ae>.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 136.

At the same time, Teen Chicago's emphasis on teens as its object of historical research represented an appeal to a different key constituency CHS sought to attract to the museum. New CHS president Lonnie G. Bunch wanted CHS to work closely with teachers and see itself as an educational institution. He brought previous experience working on teen projects in New Jersey and California, as well as a reputation as a nationally respected museum professional.⁴⁵ Across the museum field, teens were increasingly seen as crucial audience members: museums that had emphasized attracting young children and families wanted to keep those visitors as they aged, and museum professionals saw youth as a source of fresh perspective and cultural relevance.⁴⁶ However, "we had zero teenagers visiting the Chicago History Museum on their own," said project director Marie Scatena, so "we had a mandate to do a lot of programming."⁴⁷ Teen Chicago would fulfill that mandate. Framing the project as educational programming dramatically changed how much authority the museum was willing to delegate to the community members involved in the process of building the oral history archive.

Teen Chicago built on early attempts at including teens in interpretive authority that had begun in Neighborhoods. For the Douglas/Grand Boulevard project, coordinator Tracye Matthews brought in local companies Street-Level Video and Live Wire Youth Media Video, which recruited a dozen teens in each of the four neighborhoods to interview residents and edit interviews for video documentaries played in the exhibit.⁴⁸ Involving teens in editing was

⁴⁵ Bunch had previously been associate director for curatorial affairs at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History before joining CHS in 2001, where Teen Chicago was largely seen as his project. His training in African American history and emphasis on the public aspect of community work positioned him as a progressive and experienced curator-historian.

⁴⁶ Deborah F. Schwartz, "Dude, Where's My Museum?: Inviting Teens to Transform Museums," *Museum News*, October 2005, 36.

⁴⁷ Amy M. Tyson, "Working to Connect: Oral Histories of Illinois Public Historians at the State Bicentennial," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1998-)* 111, no. 1-2 (2018): 157, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jillistathistsoc.111.1-2.0152>.

⁴⁸ Street Level Youth Media, OMM.D.1.S5-S6, Box 1-6, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Video Archives (Chicago Historical Society).

intended to bring them in early in the process and encourage them to think critically and historiographically, exposing editorial decisions made in the exhibit.⁴⁹

However, a transcript of a student training interview archived alongside other oral histories showcases the inexperience of the Neighborhoods teen videographers and their teachers via a constantly revised and rerecorded interview. Asked, “What are the problems the neighborhood will have to deal with to change for the better?” a teen narrator begins their answer, “Oh, for number one, gangs. Change gangs for the... That’s what we really need to do. ‘Cuz the gangbangers, they just gettin’ out of hand,” before being corrected by the (fellow teen) interviewer, who repeats the question and adds, “Tyrone, try to say it this way. Try to say, I think the neighborhood would be a better place if there weren’t gangs, whatever.”⁵⁰ These archival transcripts capture teens unsure of how much of their voice to present to the museum and to the archive, revising their testimony (“try to say it this way”) mid-interview to erase both informality (“they just gettin’ out of hand” becomes “I think the neighborhood would be a better place”) and personal viewpoint (“That’s what we really need to do” becomes the more passive “if there weren’t gangs”). While the mission to engage youth in all stages of the exhibit remained important, the student transcripts reveal how much work was needed to improve the process of doing so at CHS.

In the Teen Chicago project, on the other hand, authority-sharing *became* CHS’s goal, as much as or more than any future use of the oral histories. This sought to improve upon the previous teen videography process. Rather than seeing recruitment of the advisory committee as just a prerequisite to oral history gathering, as in Neighborhoods, forming and training the Teen

⁴⁹ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 113.

⁵⁰ Student interviews transcript, 1995, 2002.131, Box 2, Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society), 2.

Council became in itself a form of engagement with teens across the city. Project director Marie Scatena's selection considered "race, ethnicity, socio-economic, and academic achievement levels and geographical backgrounds, skills, talents, interests, and individual personalities" and explicitly saw this diversity as key not just to reflecting Chicago but also capturing energetic youth perspectives.⁵¹

Facilitating Teen Council was also seen as educational programming by CHS. The program was framed in terms of direct benefits to teen participants: financially, the museum paid its council members; socially, it offered them museum space to meet, socialize, and work with each other; and educationally, it offered teens ongoing training and authority to practice the skills they gained. Teen Council member Claire Elderkin noted that CHS coordinators did not shy away from allowing teens to genuinely disagree with the museum and each other over issues of authority and interpretation: "Arguments between members of the Teen Council erupted almost daily over race, sexuality, religion, the war in Iraq, gentrification, and the purpose of art, but we learned to respect each other's opinions... these 14 amazing friends... have changed the way I look at the world."⁵² This was a stark contrast to the way CHS had blunted the impact of narrators' more controversial comments, especially on race and gentrification, in *Neighborhoods*. CHS saw itself as successful in the Teen Council process if it could use the museum's resources and experience as an educational institution to foster intellectual change in the teens. This shift of focus, centering the community participants, allowed the museum to be open to genuine disagreement and authority contestation—teens were in some ways expected to be combative.

⁵¹ Linda D'Acquisto and Marie Scatena, "K-12 Curators: What Kids Learn by Designing Exhibitions," *Exhibitionist*, Fall 2006, 42.

⁵² Claire Elderkin, "Museum Notes: Coming of Age," *Museum News*, August 2005, 14.

In Teen Chicago, the community members (teens) became interviewers, rather than narrators, in the oral history process. This was a shift from *Neighborhoods*, in which the community members on advisory committees had engaged with the oral history portion of the project, but primarily as narrators (interviewees). CHS invested substantially in Teen Council's professional development. They gained background knowledge from invited speakers, participated in a long process of oral history training that started by practice interviewing each other and CHS employees before branching out to volunteers and community members, and were trusted throughout to work as equals with adult CHS staff.⁵³ Crucially, being interviewers also meant that the teens were acting as history makers. They participated in intergenerational conversations with older narrators who had been teens in the 20th century, but the Teen Council were the ones who took on the authority of the museum and control in interviews, flipping assumptions about "ordinary people" as merely sources and academics/museums as sole interpreters in oral history archives.⁵⁴ CHS took on the risk of "asking a group of kids who didn't even have high school degrees to conduct detailed research," extending trust and authority to teens to represent the museum as oral historians.⁵⁵ Prepared by their training and confident in their own voices, Teen Council would conduct 100 oral history interviews with people who had been teenagers at any point in the 1900s, creating a diverse and comprehensive study of teen life in Chicago. These two major reframings of the oral history process—focusing on the advisory process as primarily educational and seeing the community participants as primarily interviewers of oral histories—placed Teen Council in a position of greater authority, skill, and trust vis-a-vis the museum.

⁵³ Elderkin, 11.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, "'Living by Fluidity': Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving," 216.

⁵⁵ Elderkin, "Museum Notes: Coming of Age," 11.

The manuscript archive of Teen Chicago captures a similarly negotiated, inexact process as in *Neighborhoods*, but in a way that emphasizes how that process—as a consequence of placing control in the teens’ hands—was itself a goal of the project. Having already negotiated authority between themselves and the museum, Teen Council also had to find their place relative to narrators. In an extreme example, teens encountered challenges interviewing legendary oral historian Studs Terkel. The transcript captures Terkel deflecting students’ questions, but teen interviewers, in turn, fluidly departed from their compiled questionnaire to follow up and generate real response and reflection from their narrator:

R [Terkel]: I don’t know what a teenager is. Is it thirteen, it’s the beginning of it, is it not? Is it thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, what is a teenager? I still don’t know...

I [Interviewer]: It’s the transition from childhood to adulthood.

I: It differs for everybody. Everybody has different opinions.

R: Yeah. I think it’s a certain key period of blossoming, a key period of understanding... My life just flowed, one thing to another, accidents happened. There was no any one period in my life. I was going to the theater at the age of fourteen...⁵⁶

Crucially, the educational framing of the project meant that this back-and-forth and rapport-building was embraced by both narrators and interviewers. Scatena noted that Terkel, off camera, praised the questions, and teens were excited they “almost got Studs to talk about his relationship with his father and his teenage dating experience.”⁵⁷ Because the teens had some distance from the museum administration—they could genuinely occupy the role of youth who wanted to learn from older generations rather than museum staff seeking to extract narratives—they were not as obligated to “presume [friendship], nor... extend it on behalf of the museum,” a dilemma faced by oral historians who are also balancing their roles as curators.⁵⁸ The transcripts instead provide

⁵⁶ Studs Terkel oral history transcript, 2003, TER-147, TER-148, 2006.0161.1, Box 5, Folder 6, Teen Chicago Oral History Project Records Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society), 1-2.

⁵⁷ Alan H. Stein and Marie Scatena, “Studs’s Place in Oral History Education,” in *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*, by Barry Allen Lanman and Laura Marie Wendling (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 26, <https://worldcat.org/en/title/62281720>.

⁵⁸ Thomas, “Private Memory in a Public Space,” 99.

insight into how, for Teen Chicago, trust-building was embraced as a crucial part of producing the oral history archive and allowed into the interview recording itself.

Teen Council themselves are captured archivally through biographies. In a collection arranged alphabetically by first and last names, researchers encounter folders with biographies of Teen Council members among those folders containing the transcripts of oral histories they conducted. These biographies were self-written and capture the teens both as historians/museum workers playing key roles in the project and also as individuals with stories in their own right, such as one reading “Bakir is the resident web-guy of the Teen Council. He is a hard-worker who has enjoyed his time here at CHS and feels he has learned a great deal about teenagers and the city of Chicago. He was born in Sarajevo and left the country just before the war to come to Chicago.”⁵⁹

In some ways, this disrupts traditional conceptions of archival organization that would maintain records separately according to their creation—the biographies were originally administrative documents circulated among the Teen Council and in publicity materials, rather than being created during oral history interviewing. The intermixing also complicates future researchers’ ability to distinguish interviewer from narrator at a glance. It is an arrangement choice that is un-archival in nature. What this arrangement underlines is the way in which the teen participants, not just the older-generation narrators, were prioritized as communities CHS sought to capture through the Teen Chicago project and its archive. Though given the interpretive authority of interviewers, they also were given space to tell their own stories in a way that may frustrate academic historians but that highlights the teens’ own authorship. In this negotiation, the collection cedes some of the authority of orderly archival arrangement in favor

⁵⁹ Bakir Bicakcic Teen Council member biography, 2001-2004, BIC-012, 2006.0161.1, Box 1, Folder 12, Teen Chicago Oral History Project Records Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

of bringing the content of the collection more in alignment with the meaning making methods of oral history: authenticity, first-person storytelling, and an acceptance of a kind of disorderly subjectivity.

Interestingly, the Teen Chicago archive also contains many re-interviews, in which narrators who had previously participated in oral history projects for the museum were interviewed again by Teen Council. This provided a clear comparison across oral history archival collections—for example, Timuel Black, who had been a key stakeholder and a narrator in *Neighborhoods*, contributed *two* more oral histories through Teen Chicago, one about his teenage life and one specifically about his work with Harold Washington, both conducted by teen interviewers.⁶⁰ Re-interviewed narrators were conscious of the goals of the project—they agreed to be re-interviewed because they were convinced of the educational value their testimony had to the teens both on the Council and who would visit the future exhibit—and made this clear through shifted focus in the oral histories themselves.

While the *Neighborhoods* interview of Timuel Black barely devotes a line to his high school life (“I went to Wendell Phillips High School, I went to Engle High School, and I went to DuSable where I graduated. But I came back to teach later at DuSable”),⁶¹ notes by his teen interviewer, Ari Fulton, make it clear he emphasized parts of his life that would be relatable to his teenage interlocutor and indirect audience through the exhibit. In Fulton’s handwritten index of the interview, Black’s racial activism comes from a family and school connection: “Remembers talking about civil rights issues. Family came to Chicago for a better life for their children. Voteing was emporten to his parents. Teachers most racesist then students” (spelling

⁶⁰ Stein and Scatena, “Studs’s Place in Oral History Education,” 28.

⁶¹ Tim D. Black interview, February 1995, 2002.131, Box 1, *Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture Project Oral Histories and Transcripts Manuscript Collection* (Chicago Historical Society), 2.

from original).⁶² The Teen Chicago archive and its explicit educational goals resist the narrative that archives oral histories are always spontaneous. While no less valuable, they demonstrate awareness by both returning narrators and CHS as an institution of the limits of the oral history archive. Rather than each interview being expected to “fill the gaps” in historical knowledge by capturing more new “voices” (narrators), the use of re-interviews indicates CHS’s awareness of how each project and its goals could shape the historical knowledge gained in each oral history, even from the same narrator. Teen interviewers could learn something new even from someone who had previously participated in oral history projects; therefore, the museum and exhibit could gain something new. In other words, re-interviews embrace the possibilities and limitations of an oral history archive that is constantly constructed and revised (“re-figured”) rather than inherently authentic simply because the medium is oral history.⁶³

Teen Council continued participating in the project as it advanced from collecting oral histories to creating the exhibit and surrounding programming. Because they as individuals and the oral history archive as a source of knowledge were deeply embedded into the exhibition project, the archive was extensively and creatively used throughout the lifetime of the exhibit. For opening weekend, Teen Council members Ari Fulton and Claire Elderkin wrote a play, *Coming of Age*, that used the oral histories as short monologues; narrators were invited to see their stories performed by Teen Council members.⁶⁴ Opening weekend prioritized teens as the audience, with teens allowed to view the exhibit even before CHS’s member-only opening.⁶⁵ Curatorially, CHS staff made extensive use of the interviews in label writing. Per curator Joy

⁶² Ari Fulton, Timuel Black interview index, May 31, 2003, BLA-013, 2006.0161.1, Box 1, Folder 14, Teen Chicago Oral History Project Records Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

⁶³ Carolyn Hamilton, ed., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 10.

⁶⁴ Elderkin, “Museum Notes: Coming of Age,” 14.

⁶⁵ Teens Only Kickoff Party promotional postcard, 2006.0161.1, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1, Teen Chicago Oral History Project Records Manuscript Collection (Chicago Historical Society).

Bivins, “the oral testimony gave many of the objects more weight. It can be difficult to make the artifacts of youth ‘sing’ because many of them can be commonplace.”⁶⁶ And by pairing oral history recordings with spaces of comfort, like a couch and bed, from which to sit and listen, museum visitors were given the time and space in the exhibit gallery to genuinely absorb the narrators’ testimony.⁶⁷ This way, both community use (in teen-led performances and events) and museological use (to animate artifacts) immediately mobilized the oral history archive. Where archives alone may not have been able to inherently engage communities, archival *use* drew upon the resources, space, and network of the museum to do so.

Conclusions

Neighborhoods: Keepers of Culture and Teen Chicago represented experimental projects that turned to oral history archives as part of CHS’s research, outreach, and programming strategy at the turn of the 21st century. Materially, both projects revitalized the museum and raised its standing as an innovative public history institution. After Neighborhoods, CHS formalized its negotiated relationships via creating a Community Advisory Council and its emphasis on oral history through increased photo and video collecting. It addressed some of the issues of Neighborhoods in a 2001 exhibit, *Out of the Loop*, which reengaged some of the same community partners from Neighborhoods committees; but having gained more confidence in the CHS institution, narrators became more willing to “not use the oral histories as evidence to support a historical argument... instead, the voices become the argument itself” in an exhibit that more directly addressed gentrification, white flight, and class conflict.⁶⁸ Teen Chicago won

⁶⁶ D’Acquisto and Scatena, “K–12 Curators,” 44.

⁶⁷ Gonzales, *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, 66.

⁶⁸ Lewis, *The Changing Face of Public History*, 119.

prizes for exhibition process and product from the American Association of Museums,⁶⁹ generated a curriculum guide used widely by other teen oral history projects, and formed the model for the ongoing efforts of the Studs Terkel Center for Oral History at CHM, which continues to hire teen oral historians for exhibition research projects.⁷⁰

The exhibits' success meaningfully influenced CHM's institutional history and led the museum to continue prioritizing authority-sharing, youth engagement, and oral history after 2005. The oral history archives capture previously understudied histories—of Chicago neighborhoods after World War II and of Chicago teenage life across the 20th century. However, the archives also reflect the institutional negotiations that made the projects possible and in fact necessary for institutional survival. Answering the call that “the circumstances of the production of specific oral archives require close attention, subject as they are to many of the same processes of modification, selection and exclusion as the documentary record,”⁷¹ this paper has examined a specific oral history archive in which the museum acted as creator, preservationist, processor, and researcher in one, providing a unique opportunity to think of archival creation and mobilization as closely linked. Not just the oral recordings but also the extensive supplementary material captured in an oral history project—transcripts, notes, consent forms, biographies—present a nuanced picture of the institution over time. They expose negotiations and tradeoffs made throughout the process of oral history projects at CHM, especially as the museum sought to define itself as a community institution through the resulting exhibits. Museum authority clashed with the “authentic” viewpoints CHS claimed to value in its oral histories. As narrators' private

⁶⁹ Daniel Oliver, “Exhibition Competition: From the Winners: ‘Teen Chicago’ Chicago Historical Society,” *Museum News*, October 2005, 54.

⁷⁰ Alter interview, February 2023.

⁷¹ Hamilton, *Refiguring the Archive*, 10.

memories became public history through interviews, public oral historians were captured as part of the fraught history of the museum in their own right.

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