

2021

## The Platinum Rule Meets the Golden Minimum: Inclusive and Efficient Archival Description of Oral Histories

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### Recommended Citation

Stephan, Weatherly A. (2021) "The Platinum Rule Meets the Golden Minimum: Inclusive and Efficient Archival Description of Oral Histories," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 11. Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/11>

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## The Platinum Rule Meets the Golden Minimum: Inclusive and Efficient Archival Description of Oral Histories

### Cover Page Footnote

The author is grateful to Megan O'Shea and Chela Scott Weber for their contributions to the project described in this article.

## THE PLATINUM RULE MEETS THE GOLDEN MINIMUM: INCLUSIVE AND EFFICIENT ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION OF ORAL HISTORIES

### Introduction

Oral history is a challenging genre for processing archivists and catalogers. As recorded media, they inherently require preservation work for safe playback and long-term storage. As primary sources that often benefit from individualized description, oral histories can be seen as both archival and bibliographic resources, often sitting in grey areas in library and archives holdings. Oral history professionals have argued that metadata for these resources can and should follow existing description systems and standards, making the most effective use of staff skills, training, and access systems.<sup>1</sup> Collecting institutions must therefore decide, based on local needs and resources, what type of technical-services expertise is best suited to create metadata for search and retrieval of oral histories.<sup>2</sup> While the historic and intrinsic value of oral histories as information resources is firmly established, archivists have grappled with how to complete timely preservation and processing of oral histories since the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

In an era where diversity and inclusion are core principles of archival practice, there is an increasing recognition of the silences and lacks of representation in the archival record. Oral histories are therefore important primary sources to not only collect but to steward responsibly, with care. At New York University's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, which holds 90 collections of topically grouped oral histories, over 50 percent of the oral history collections are under-described or not represented in online finding aids as of January 2021. Most finding aids for processed oral histories simply provide a listing of narrator names and broad collection-level description of interview content.<sup>4</sup> With a New York State Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) arrangement and description grant, Archival Collections Management at NYU Libraries (ACM) developed a descriptive methodology for oral histories that sought to define the golden minimum for providing access to these resources, an application of Greene and Meissner's "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) framework that results in efficiently processed but richly described oral history interviews.<sup>5</sup> When using a methodology rooted in efficiency and metrics, the author was struck by the need to explore ethical and empathetic ways to approach oral history description.

Over the course of the DHP-funded processing project, the author explored three key questions. Is there a way to process oral history to the golden minimum? Is there a way to process oral history ethically, with an empathetic approach to narrators and the communities they originate from or

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Kata, "Not Another Schema: Describing Oral Histories," *Oral History in the Digital Age* (October 2015), <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2015/10/the-oha-metadata-task-force-the-force-behind-our-task/>.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce H. Bruemmer, "Access to Oral History: A National Agenda," *American Archivist* 54 (Fall 1991): 494-501.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Guide to the New York City Central Labor Council Oral History Collection, [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_007/](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh_007/), or Guide to the United Federation of Teachers Oral History Collection, [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_009/](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh_009/).

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2004): 240.

discuss? And is there a way to do both at the same time? This article presents an oral history–description methodology, rooted in both efficient processing practices and cultural humility, that ACM now applies to both oral histories and most archival audio and video recordings. Prior to processing the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral Histories, Tamiment staff typically regarded oral history and audiovisual processing as a time-consuming task that required maximum effort. The author presents this case study as both the former head of arrangement and description, responsible for direct supervision of processing on the project under discussion, and now as the head of the department, focusing broadly on the labor and time needed to process prioritized and backlog collections held by NYU Special Collections. In addition to describing the application of these policies when processing oral history collections, this article examines the professional ethics that guide this work. Practices for oral history recording and transcription necessarily differ from archival description standards, and the professional literature in both the archival and oral history fields will benefit from discussion of how best to implement ethical archival descriptive practices when working with the narratives of marginalized and underrepresented groups.<sup>6</sup> The results of the DHP processing project show not only that it is possible to approach oral histories with inclusivity and efficiency at the fore but that archivists can process with both of these principles successfully. Most importantly, doing so can set the foundation for an inclusive and reparative description program.

## Literature Review

The methodologies described in this paper draw from different, though related, areas of the archives and oral history professions. These include ethics, the overlap of ethics and cultural humility, inclusive practices for description, and description of oral history. Although archival description allows for a flexible, iterative approach to processing oral histories, professional standards and best practices also require that archivists engage with ethical concerns and acknowledge the roles that positionality, subjectivity, and representation hold in the descriptive process.

While oral history manuals such as Donald A. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History* and Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan’s *The Oral History Manual* effectively establish the evidentiary value of oral histories, neither spends much time investigating or discussing the nuts and bolts of describing or cataloging these materials. Furthermore, the authors do not consider the need for efficiency in description.<sup>7</sup> Sommer and Quinlan provide guidance on interview transcription and creating timed indices, and they suggest a ratio of up to eight hours of transcription and editing for every one hour of recording.<sup>8</sup> Nancy MacKay’s *Curating Oral Histories* provides cataloging guidelines with the assumption that a cataloger or processing archivist would not have time or resources to listen to recordings. Instead, MacKay suggests that all descriptive metadata be

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<sup>6</sup> “‘Filling the Gaps’: Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2016): 274–75. While Webster’s study examines articles on oral history and underrepresented populations solely published in *American Archivist* over a 70-year span, her analysis nevertheless shows a need to discuss more oral history documentation efforts with underrepresented communities in archival literature as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 169–71.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 105–8

supplied by interviewers.<sup>9</sup> Marion E. Matters's 1995 *Oral History Cataloging Manual*, one of the earliest description publications aimed at an archival audience, provides suggestions for baseline descriptive fields and extensive field-by-field guidance for archival description of oral histories. While the Matters *Manual* shaped archival descriptive practice for oral history, it predates *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) by a decade, and DACS itself has undergone major revisions since first publication in 2005.<sup>10</sup> The Oral History Association's Metadata Task Force, which conducted a profession-wide survey of practices between 2016 and 2019, found that Dublin Core is used by repositories as often as DACS and more frequently than MARC to describe oral history. Practitioners employ CONTENTdm and the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) as often as archival management systems like ArchivesSpace.<sup>11</sup> In sum, there is wide variation in descriptive practice among oral history stewards in libraries and archives.

Archivists and librarians have shared many institutions' approaches to oral history description in literature while also enumerating the inherent challenges, whether using a bibliographic or archival approach. Most case studies center on the themes of representing the content of interviews in culturally responsive ways within controlled vocabularies, and they underscore the difficulties of finding balance in detailed description while working at scale. Alexandra A. A. Orchard details a project to make the Reuther Library's oral history collection fully discoverable and accessible at Wayne State University. The Reuther project involved creating ArchivesSpace resource records to produce finding aids and MARC records for each of 1,600 unprocessed oral history collections. In order to meet the challenge of scale with that backlog, Reuther archivists had to forego the creation of local name records for each interviewee at the collection level, instead making a practice of listing all interviewees in a scope and content note.<sup>12</sup> Susan Wynne describes a bibliographic cataloging approach used at Columbus State University to produce MARC records for individual interviews as a nimble way of supporting online discovery when the library did not have finding aids online. Wynne's methodology relied on access to transcriptions of the interviews, and like Orchard, she also noted difficulty in performing detailed authority control for individual interviewees.<sup>13</sup>

Building on challenges with library authorities, oral history presents a unique twist on the limitations of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), which are well documented.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Fraser, in discussing the Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations oral history project at the Brooklyn Historical Society, identified the inherent difficulty in using controlled vocabularies to describe "interviews whose very purpose was to give individuals the space to describe

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<sup>9</sup> Nancy MacKay, *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Marion E. Matters, *Oral History Cataloging Manual* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Oral History Association Metadata Task Force, "Oral History Metadata and Description: A Survey of Practices" (Oral History Association, December 2020), 11-12, [https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OHA-MTF-White-Paper\\_2020.pdf](https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OHA-MTF-White-Paper_2020.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Alexandra A. A. Orchard, "Oral History Description at the Reuther Library," *Descriptive Notes: The Description Section Newsletter of the Society of American Archivists* (Winter 2017): 5, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/DescriptiveNotes2017Winter.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Susan C. Wynne, "Cataloging Oral Histories: Creating MARC Records for Individual Oral History Interviews," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 47, no. 6 (2009): 561-82.

<sup>14</sup> Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971).

themselves in their own words.” Fraser found that controlled vocabularies do not easily categorize facets of an oral history interview like emotion, voice, and expression.<sup>15</sup> Lindsey Barnes and Kim Guise discuss the creation of a local controlled vocabulary at the National World War II Museum for video oral histories, and they similarly find that thesauri like LCSH fall short when used to describe experiences and actions at a granular, interview level.<sup>16</sup>

Transcription is vital in creating accessible conditions for audio or video oral history interviews, supporting use by researchers of all abilities. Many online services generate automated text transcripts from recordings that are high quality and require minimal cleanup. However, transcription alone cannot address the perennial gap of supporting serendipitous discovery through subject-based inquiry rather than simply known-item searching. Although a sole focus on automated transcription during processing may be the most efficient and cost-effective manner of offering access into digitized oral history interviews, description in addition to transcription can offer distillation of key concepts of the interview in searchable keywords, as well as insight into the interviewee’s affect and demeanor. Both Jeff Friedman and Nien Yuan Cheng have called attention to the limitations of transcripts in conveying performance, movement, and other nonverbal communication in interviews, with Cheng arguing that oral historians and transcribers should “embody the transcript as vividly as possible.”<sup>17</sup> Transcripts also allow for full-text searches of the interview, whether as a standalone document or in an integrated search and access system like AV Preserve’s Aviary. Together, transcripts and archivist-produced description provide deeper contextualization of an interviewee’s story and create keyword-searchable metadata that can emphasize different access points into the content of interviews.

Beyond specific guidelines for oral history description, how do the archives and oral history professions engage the imperatives of ethics in the context of archival description and metadata creation? *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* begins with principles for archival description, the first of which declares that archival description is rooted in the profession’s ethics and values. This principle also explicitly recognizes description as an iterative practice, and it introduces the idea of “responsible and responsive” description, which privileges equity in access and diversifies the documentary record.<sup>18</sup> The Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) “Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” upon which the DACS principles are founded, forefronts access, diversity, and social responsibility in archivists’ work. Each of these values relates to not only description—the primary means of discovery and access for archival materials—but also to description rooted in respect and humility for communities represented in records.<sup>19</sup> Oral historians likewise remain cognizant of the regular need to interrogate their work. Most oral history ethics discussions center

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Fraser, “‘Human Skin Color’ and the Challenges of Using LCSH to Describe Oral History,” *Metropolitan Archivist* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 12.

<sup>16</sup> Lindsey Barnes and Kim Guise, “World War Words: The Creation of a World War II-Specific Vocabulary for the Oral History Collection at The National WWII Museum,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013): 126-34.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Friedman, “Oral History, Hermeneutics, and Embodiment,” *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 290-300; Nien Yuan Cheng, “‘Flesh and Blood Archives’: Embodying the Oral History Transcript,” *Oral History Review* 45, no. 1 (2018): 128.

<sup>18</sup> “Statement of Principles,” in Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* version 2019.0.4, [https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04\\_statement\\_of\\_principles.html](https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04_statement_of_principles.html).

<sup>19</sup> Society of American Archivists, “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” <https://www2.archivists.org/-statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

on the oral historian as a researcher interacting with an interviewee, who could be harmed through the process of recording or later representation.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to SAA's document, the Oral History Association's (OHA) "Statement on Ethics" covers a wider spectrum of practices around oral history and identifies all actors in the oral history life cycle, including archivists, as forming a "web of mutual responsibility" that respects "the narrator's perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety."<sup>21</sup> When discussing the ethics of stewardship, OHA specifically notes the need to "respect the personhood" of the narrator when making decisions concerning description, metadata, and access.<sup>22</sup> The OHA's Core Principles emphasize that oral history practitioners, whether interviewers or archivists, must be rooted in ethical practices and must maintain "respect for narrators and the communities from which they come [... and honor] diverse cultural values, ways of knowing, and perspectives."<sup>23</sup> The OHA's "Principles and Best Practices" go on to emphasize metadata and description among the six primary areas of focus, and the need to both collect and steward metadata throughout the life cycle of the materials represented.<sup>24</sup>

Inclusive description, a foundation of the descriptive methodology in this project, draws from several principles found throughout archival literature on archivists' affective relationships, making archivists' interventions conscientious and transparent, and including represented communities in archival processes. Inclusive practice recognizes that archivists are humans with positionalities and biases; therefore, archivists' work and approaches are not neutral. Debunking the myth of neutrality in archival description, Wendy Duff and Verne Harris remind archivists that "no approach to archival description, no descriptive system or architecture, can escape the reality that it is a way of constructing knowledge."<sup>25</sup> Instead of relying on positional authority and the veil of neutrality, archivists working toward inclusive practice seek to privilege community- and self-identification of archival creators and subjects. Further, archivists embrace responsibility for continuous self-education to learn more about cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences outside of their own.<sup>26</sup>

Several authors have proposed approaches that encourage archivists to examine their roles with records creators and communities that are in line with inclusive archival and descriptive practices. Elizabeth Yakel implores archivists and catalogers working with description and descriptive systems to balance their power and authority with the subjectivity of representing records, their

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<sup>20</sup> Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Who's Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (2016): 339.

<sup>21</sup> Oral History Association, "Statement on Ethics," <https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics/>.

<sup>22</sup> Oral History Association, "Statement on Ethics."

<sup>23</sup> Oral History Association, "OHA Core Principles" <https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-core-principles/>.

<sup>24</sup> Oral History Association, *Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices* (updated October 2019), <https://www.oralhistory.org/archives-principles-and-best-practices-complete-manual/#Metadata>.

<sup>25</sup> Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 275.

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Tai, "The Power of Words: Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (2020): 4.

creators, and subjects.<sup>27</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor posit four relationships for which archivists take affective responsibility, based on radical empathy and an ethics of care: relationships between archivists and creators, subjects, users, and larger communities.<sup>28</sup> Jessica Tai presents an anti-oppressive descriptive model rooted in cultural humility, rather than a model that merely adheres to cultural competency. Tai identifies the need for archivist self-learning and reflection, which mitigates traditional harm of neutrality, oppression, and white supremacy, “to shift towards more ethical, collaborative, and community-centered forms of representation.”<sup>29</sup> Recalling that oral history and archival ethics both privilege the record creator (in this case, interviewee or narrator) as the party to whom the archivist bears the most responsibility, refocusing on the affective relationships to subjects, users, and the larger communities, all of whom can be a member of the same group as or a different group from the interviewee, is an important addition to the professional discourse. Equally important when working with traditionally marginalized communities is the need to examine language, identities, and the shifts in these concepts over time in recorded oral history. Erin Baucom has argued that archivists can perpetrate harm when applying modern terminology or concepts to historical materials; Baucom problematizes community feedback and input by noting that the LGBTQ community, for instance, does not have agreement on monolithic terminology for its own group. As a compromise, Baucom suggests using original terminology when possible, or language that is contemporaneous to the time of the creator’s life or records creation.<sup>30</sup> Lauren Haberstock’s participatory description methodology centers on the principles of thoughtful, coordinated, and cooperative work between archives and creator communities to “build respectful and reciprocal relationships that are appropriately tailored to local contexts.”<sup>31</sup> Beyond individual processes or programs such as description within a repository, Jessica Tai identifies that “archival institutions hold a responsibility to the communities whose materials they hold, especially if the way in which those communities are being represented further marginalizes them.”<sup>32</sup>

The fact remains that description—no matter how intentionally researched and community-guided—becomes fixed in the moment in time in which it was created and published, unless it is continuously revisited. Extensible processing, a resource-guided approach to managing processing in archives developed by Daniel Santamaria, therefore includes a core principle for archivists to iterate upon arrangement and description in a systematic way.<sup>33</sup> Extensible processing and the DACS “Statement of Principles” call for archivists to revisit description when use demonstrates

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 19.

<sup>28</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 33.

<sup>29</sup> Tai, “The Power of Words,” 3.

<sup>30</sup> Erin Baucom, “An Exploration into Archival Descriptions of LGBTQ Materials,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 80.

<sup>31</sup> Lauren Haberstock, “Participatory Description: Decolonizing Descriptive Methodologies in Archives,” *Archival Science* 20 (2020): 135.

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Tai, “Retelling as Resistance: Towards the Implementation of Community-Centered Frameworks in the Redescription of Photographic Archives Documenting Marginalized Communities,” *Views* 32, no 1 (2018): 16, [http://saavms.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Views\\_SpringSummer\\_2018.pdf](http://saavms.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Views_SpringSummer_2018.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: ALA Neal Schuman, 2015), 22-23.



the need to do so.<sup>34</sup> Iterative description need not be a time-consuming remedy for efficient initial processing; iterative work, even reparative work, can be guided by deadlines, and Santamaria cautions that returning to a collection “does not mean that the entire collection needs to be fully [re]processed.”<sup>35</sup> Embracing inclusive and anti-oppressive practice is a valid, systematic ground for iteration and reparative work, though archivists should ensure that their iterative actions are documented. Heather MacNeil argues that despite the potential for questions and criticisms to arise when making decisions and actions transparent, archivists should document archival interventions, thus “surrendering our role as invisible and omniscient narrators and accepting we are among the characters in a story told through our descriptions.”<sup>36</sup> In arguing for better transparency and accountability of how creators, donors, curators, and archivists all shape an archival collection through creation, custodianship, acquisition, and processing, Jennifer Douglas also calls for description to be recast as a “fluid and evolving practice,” one that can take into account new knowledge as it is available.<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Yakel’s call to archivists to think “in terms of continuous, relative, fluid arrangements and descriptions as on-going representational processes” is likewise in line with iterative work.<sup>38</sup> The oral history processing project under discussion will therefore explore the creation of intentionally inclusive description at initial processing, with recognition of the need for iterative reparative work. Both imperatives not only align with efficient and extensible approaches to identify a collection’s baseline processing needs but also form a complete and inclusive program grounded in cultural humility.

### **Processing the New York City Immigrant Labor Oral Histories**

Within these historical frameworks for oral history and archival description profession-wide, an Archival Collections Management project processing team advanced the question of how to conduct both inclusive and efficient processing of oral histories with the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection (collection identifier OH.014). This collection originates from a National Endowment for the Humanities-funded oral history project, led by City University of New York (CUNY) professor Herbert Gutman from 1973 to 1976. The New York City Immigrant Labor History Project, in which CUNY students served as interviewers, resulted in 218 interviews with retired union members living in New York City who immigrated to the United States or migrated from the Southern United States between 1915 and 1945. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the interviewees were between 70 and 100 years old. Thus, the collection captures a distinct generational perspective of early to mid-20th century American migration experiences, and it also encapsulates a broad view of the labor movement in New York City.

Gutman donated the oral histories collected during the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project to the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives in approximately 1983, six years after the conclusion of the project. Notably, signed release forms for only ten of the interviewees are extant, but the template for the releases acknowledged that the interviews would

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<sup>34</sup> Santamaria, *Extensible Processing*, 36-39; Society of American Archivists, “Statement of Principles.”

<sup>35</sup> Santamaria, *Extensible Processing*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Heather MacNeil, “Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and Archivist as Editor,” *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 272.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Douglas, “Toward More Honest Description,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 49.

<sup>38</sup> Yakel, “Archival Representation,” 4.

be used for scholarly and educational purposes. Given other collection management issues uncovered before and during this project, the curator and ACM staff presumed the repository misplaced the remaining releases, as also happened with some recordings in the collection. Tamiment curators have unsuccessfully attempted to locate interviewees or next of kin to secure additional releases since the collection's acquisition. For over 35 years, the collection remained unprocessed and only marginally accessible; researchers were provided access through paper inventories of interviewee names and subject indices, and transcripts were available for just under half of the interviews. The collection was discoverable online through a brief collection-level abstract on Tamiment's website.<sup>39</sup> Already hampered by narrow paths to discovery, researchers had to be willing to engage in guesswork as to which interviewees could be pertinent to their topic of study. Their guesses were based on the indices and limited biographical information, such as surnames. Not only was this type of description insufficient for broad-scale discovery, but it also led to tokenization of particular interviewees based on assumptions around their surname. For instance, first and last names could occlude interviewees' ethnic backgrounds, as researchers could not distinguish interviewees of Caribbean and Black Southern origins from white interviewees with English names. Similarly, women were only identified by married name, although several narrators married into different ethnic groups than their family of origin. Beyond hampered discoverability, the audio media presented obstacles. About 70 percent of the collection had been transferred to cassette tape prior to the processing project; for the remaining 30 percent, researchers could request on-demand digitization of individual interviews, which required an external vendor without in-house equipment to transfer quarter-inch open audio reels. While some researchers were able to use portions of the collection prior to its processing, the majority were faculty or doctoral candidates with funding to support extended research within the collection. In other words, access was not equitable for all types of users, and both processing and digitization reconciled that inequity.

In 2016, the New York State Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) awarded NYU Libraries funding to process the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection. DHP grants for arrangement and description projects require that materials and the repository have a New York State focus and be open to the public following completion of the grant. DHP projects must address one of four topical priorities, one of which includes the "social, cultural, political, and economic lives of [New York-based] communities and their engagement with the broader history and culture of the state," and funded projects must speak directly to the New York State Historical Records Advisory Board's mandate to make available records relating to underrepresented groups or subjects.<sup>40</sup> The program discourages producing item-level description of traditional records, requiring a rationale for the applicant's estimated processing rates based on physical condition and content of materials. NYU's successful application adapted DHP's processing rates for paper-based records, equating one cubic foot of "a fairly straightforward collection" with one oral history interview, and processing an average of ten interviews per full-time equivalent week.<sup>41</sup> NYU's justification for item-level description was two-fold: recorded media are not self-describing objects, and the combination of audio sampling and textual surveying

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<sup>39</sup> This collection-level description prior to processing, and a MARC record, are included as exemplars in Matters, *Oral History Cataloging Manual*, 80-81.

<sup>40</sup> New York State Archives Documentary Heritage Program, *Grant Application Guidelines and Resources 2020-2021*, 14-16, [http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/dhp\\_grant\\_guidelines\\_2020-2021\\_1.pdf](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/dhp_grant_guidelines_2020-2021_1.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> New York State Archives, *Grant Application Guidelines and Resources*, 38.

with available transcripts would ensure an efficiently executed project. Thus, the award occasioned an opportunity to pilot a processing method that put efficiency at the fore while also exploring ethics and best practices for the material.

While not all oral history and media-based collections held by Tamiment fall under the topical focus of the DHP grant, the successful application for this grant allowed for the piloting and analysis of this processing methodology for future projects. Indeed, the following year, ACM refined this methodology for a subsequent DHP-funded project, processing the Lower East Side Oral History Project interviews with the same framework.<sup>42</sup> The methodology, designed by former ACM head Chela Scott Weber as an application of an extensible processing or MPLP framework for oral histories, seeks balance between the time-intensive work of listening to interviews in real time with the need to provide deep contextual description for discovery and access of individual interviews. Using an estimate of the total amount of original audio in the collection (approximately 90 minutes per interview), this processing metric broke down to two hours of description work per interview. The processing archivist then set weekly benchmarks for the project team and adjusted assignments between the three project staff members as needed based on these benchmarks.

In order to keep pace with this goal, processors working with original audio recordings used a sampling technique designed by Weber, an adaptation of probability sampling, within files instead of across files, for a statistically valid sample of the recording.<sup>43</sup> Processors listened fully to the first 20 minutes of an interview, when orienting information about the interviewee and the interview settings are typically established, and then listened to 10 to 25 minutes of additional audio throughout the recording, for up to 45 minutes, fast forwarding through portions of the interview once content could be discerned in five to ten minute increments. On average, this equated to processors listening to 50 percent of all interviews in total. Then, following the locally developed oral history descriptive guidelines, processors wrote interview descriptive notes for up to 45 minutes, and preserved the remaining 15 minutes for review and discussion with the project archivist.

The project team was staffed by one full-time processing archivist and two part-time assistants from archival and library science graduate programs. Before the project period commenced, the archivist prepared introductory material for the project team, including a list of known interviewer names, an orientation session with senior members of Archival Collections Management and the Tamiment Library, and lists of common union names and subject terms expected to be used in both collection and interview descriptions. The archivist divided all interviews in the collection among the project team, with graduate student assistants receiving interviews without transcripts and the archivist self-assigning interviews with transcripts or indices. These assignments were divided with the rationale that students could work more efficiently by using the guidance of run time on audio player software, and visually scanning transcripts for contextual information was akin to the rapid review archivists typically undertake while surveying a text-based archival collection.

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<sup>42</sup> Guide to the New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, [http://dlib.nyu.edu/-findingaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_033/](http://dlib.nyu.edu/-findingaids/html/tamwag/oh_033/).

<sup>43</sup> Terry Cook, “‘Many are called, but few are chosen’: Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 27.

The archivist and the head of arrangement and description tailored ACM's general processing guidelines to provide specific instructions for oral history, including how to distinguish biographical information and scope and contents to represent the content of interviews accurately, and standard language for identifying New York City neighborhoods as well maps of regions and nations that had undergone significant geopolitical change since the time of the interviewee's emigration. The descriptive guidelines specified what the structure and content of descriptive notes should have and provided screenshots for proper entry of this data into the collection management system. During the first day of the project, the team heard from Tamiment curatorial and public services staff about desired outcomes and user behavior that could influence descriptive work; public services staff and users alike wanted to be able to search descriptions that represented an interviewee's emotions and feelings about different times or events reflected in the interview, as well as complex connections around intersectional identities. The project team also piloted the processing methodology by sampling an interview together, each writing up description, and peer reviewing to ensure their work would be uniform and all members understood how to put the standards into practice.

Even with these instructions and guidelines in place, the team found that describing oral histories inevitably requires conscientious decision making and reliance on professional judgment. Interviews, like journals and correspondence, are the most essential of primary sources, leaving little to nothing outside of an interviewee's own words to contextualize and describe in metadata. Very few other types of materials make archivists face the direct words of an individual addressing their own life experience. In initial review of interview scope notes in the first weeks of processing, the project team first realized the need to distinguish the language used by interviewees from language that exhibits a more culturally respectful, contemporary awareness of identities, religion, regions, and cultures. Throughout the project, the team continued to refine project-specific instructions over the course of regular review and revision of description; the team addressed each new question in an iterative manner with research and published community guidance informing descriptive decisions.

The development of iterative description practices in ACM archivists began with this project, and the practices have evolved significantly over the last four years to encompass an enriched sense of how oral history ethics and inclusive practices are vital components of the descriptive process. Staff at NYU were introduced to the concept of the platinum rule in an inclusive leadership and management training program. Rhodes Perry's *Belonging at Work* defines the platinum rule as "treat[ing] others in the way that they want to be treated, as opposed to the golden rule of treating others in the way in which you want to be treated."<sup>44</sup> This idea formed the basis of the inclusive descriptive methodology for oral histories, which is now a part of ACM's inclusive and reparative practices.<sup>45</sup>

With over 40 years passing between the time of the interviews and processing, it is inevitable that colloquial and community language and consciousness evolved, leaving the exact terms used by some interviewees problematic or harmful. A discussion of some of these instances follows,

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<sup>44</sup> Rhodes Perry, *Belonging at Work: Everyday Actions You Can Take to Cultivate an Inclusive Organization* (Portland, OR: PYP Academy Press, 2018), 135.

<sup>45</sup> "Cross Program Documentation: Inclusive and Reparative Archival Practices" in *Archival Collections Management LibGuide*, <https://guides.nyu.edu/archival-collections-management/cross-program-documentation>.

including the use of terminology by interviewees that is either not preferred, inaccurate, or harmful today; the contrast between how a person describes or identifies themselves, and how language and those identities may change over time; and the potential harm created when interviewees describe groups of which they are not a part. Compounding this evolution in spoken language and identification was the also natural tension of grouping together so many individuals with such vast, albeit unique, experiences—including Eastern European immigrants, Caribbean immigrants and migrants, and Southern United States migrants. While the project team initially intended to preserve the original language of interviewees, these cases quickly showed the complications of doing so: in the most severe instances, preserving an interviewee’s words would not only misalign description from the principle of inclusion, but it could cause harm to communities represented in the interview, either as creators or as subjects. To forefront inclusion and improve consistency in searchability, both within the finding aids and across collection descriptions in the repository, the project team made a conscientious decision to change and unify descriptive language in ways that ranged from standard to complex. On the standard end of the spectrum, references to an interviewee’s home country or region of origin varied wildly, with some interviewees referring to regions that no longer exist or applying contemporaneous geopolitical names when discussing the time of their emigration. Processors used city or region names as given by interviewees, with countries or empires confirmed through digitized historical maps from the Perry-Castañeda Library.<sup>46</sup> As all interviewees lived in New York City, their references to streets, neighborhoods, and boroughs were always contextualized within the geography of the city and state of New York.

Moving toward more complex decisions to refine interviewee’s words in description, references to spoken languages and religions varied, even among the same cultural or ethnic groups. One interviewee, for instance, declared that a family “spoke Jewish” in the home, and they offered no indication of whether this meant Yiddish, Hebrew, or another language. The interviewer did not follow up to clarify this statement.<sup>47</sup> Whether this statement was a relic of the time of the interview, the interviewee’s multilingual upbringing, or a simplification for the sake of the large generational gap between the CUNY students and union retirees, word for word transcription would not provide the nuanced connection between ethnic and religious identities the processing team and public services staff hoped to surface in their work. Processors therefore made clear in description where they had to make presumptions of language or traditions, serving the end goal of being both clear to researchers and respectful of the represented communities within the collection.

How interviewees described groups they were not a part of also required careful judgment and decisions in description. The most extreme example was one interviewee who engaged in exhaustive tirades about different ethnic immigrant and migrant groups. The interviewee expressed many anti-Black views throughout the interview. This individual also recorded the lengthiest interview for the Immigrant Labor Oral History Project, more than three times the length of most

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<sup>46</sup> Historical Maps of Europe, University of Texas Libraries Perry Castañeda Library Map Collection, [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history\\_europe.html](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_europe.html).

<sup>47</sup> Ref90, Guide to the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_014/dscaspace\\_ref408.html#aspace\\_ref90](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/oh_014/dscaspace_ref408.html#aspace_ref90). In compliance with use restrictions placed on the collection by Gutman (“Researchers may not use the names of the interviewees in any publication”), specific interviews will be cited via the archival object’s unique identifier within the finding aid.

interviews, around six hours.<sup>48</sup> While their selection for the Immigrant Labor History Project showed a recognition of the importance of their lived experience as a Jewish Polish immigrant, the project's descriptive methodology initially led the assigned processor to place too much emphasis on enumerating this interviewee's many personal grievances with groups and communities of which they were not a part in a draft scope and contents note. Upon review, the project team decided that preserving this interview could support research into racism and racist attitudes of the era of the interview; however, this preservation did not need to do so at the expense of those who had experienced and would continue to experience racism. Recalling Caswell and Cifor's affective relationship to users and communities, and Jessica Tai's entreaty that repositories bear responsibility to not further marginalize communities represented in their holdings, the processing team simplified discussion of this interviewee's views to note his "racist beliefs about the Black community."<sup>49</sup> This decision felt ethically aligned with guidance from OHA and SAA, as the interviewee's original words remain preserved in the recording, and the impact of the discussion is plainly noted for researchers, along with a content warning added in 2021.

The project team also made decisions during processing that were later revisited in ongoing reparative work. These decisions are detailed further here in the spirit of continuous learning and transparency.<sup>50</sup> Initially, the project team did not capitalize "Black" in description, following 2016 guidance from the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). This finding aid was later flagged in 2021 during a reparative audit of description, which coincided with the NABJ publishing changes to their style guide.<sup>51</sup> The project team also described the interviewee's enslaved ancestors inconsistently. While some interview description used the adjective "enslaved," others referred to ancestors as "freed slaves" or "former slaves," as well as "slave owners" rather than "enslavers." The project team's work in 2016 showed an earnest, though flawed attempt to forefront the humanity of enslaved people in description, and references to "slaves" and "owners" were later flagged and updated to better adhere to guidance provided by P. Gabrielle Foreman and other slavery scholars in 2021.<sup>52</sup> The NABJ's revision of their guidelines, along with the development of Foreman's community-sourced educational document, shows how quickly resources can become available that guide both current and reparative descriptive decisions. Processors documenting decisions, and what references guided those decisions, will aid in transparency for both researchers and future archivists about how and why particular descriptive terminology and language was used.

Seven interviewees used the word "illegal" to describe their entry into the United States or

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<sup>48</sup> Ref787, Guide to the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_014/dscaspace\\_ref408.html#aspace\\_ref787](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingsaids/html/tamwag/oh_014/dscaspace_ref408.html#aspace_ref787).

<sup>49</sup> Ref787, Guide to the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection.

<sup>50</sup> While original uses of the terms discussed have since been changed in the published finding aid, the full version history of the finding aid is available through the NYU Libraries GitHub: [https://github.com/NYULibraries/findingsaids\\_eads/commits/master/tamwag/oh\\_014.xml](https://github.com/NYULibraries/findingsaids_eads/commits/master/tamwag/oh_014.xml).

<sup>51</sup> National Association of Black Journalists, "NABJ Statement on Capitalizing Black and Other Racial Identifiers," in *NABJ Style Guide* (June 2020), <https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguide>.

<sup>52</sup> P. Gabrielle Foreman et al., "Writing about Slavery/Teaching about Slavery: This Might Help," community-sourced document, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYslX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/edit>.

European countries.<sup>53</sup> The polarizing phrase “illegal immigrant” came into use in the early 20th century, and many of the interviewees may have actually crossed borders before the term was widely popular.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, it is the most clear-cut case in the collection of both the evolution of language over time—with sometimes 100 years passing between the interviewee’s immigration and archival description—and the tension between a person’s self-identification and how social norms around identities change. In the 21st century, this term is widely recognized as derogatory and harmful. While many of the emigres at the time of their departure may have been seen as members of minority ethnic groups upon arrival in the United States, the fact is that ethnic Italian, German, and Russian emigres are now generally considered white, and the term “illegal immigrant” is overwhelmingly applied to Latin American immigrants. The project team initially repeated the term “illegal” in description, after discussion and re-review of each interviewee’s use of the term, although processing was occurring at the moment the Library of Congress considered revising the subject heading “illegal alien” in favor of the less pejorative phrases “noncitizens” and “unauthorized immigration.”<sup>55</sup> ACM archivists later changed this term to “undocumented” during an audit and reparative cleanup of the term “illegal immigration” across finding aids.

The policy decisions around language during the Immigrant Labor History Project processing project were only a start to inclusive and reparative work, which ACM archivists understand to be ongoing. As demonstrated, limited research and community engagement (owing to the tight timeline of the DHP grant) left problematic language in place despite well-meaning attempts to be inclusive. In line with the original spirit of efficiency in the processing project, reparative work on the collection was still mindfully resourced, with review, research, and revision of the finding aid taking two full time equivalent days for an archivist. While it is difficult to predict the frequency with which finding aids will be revisited for reparative work, incorporating inclusive principles and continuous self-directed learning from the start ensures that at least the most relevant descriptive guidelines for communities being described will be used. In this case, as over four years had passed, guidelines for reparative work became readily available.

The detail and level of description produced during the Immigrant Labor History Project processing provides an enriched finding aid that promotes discovery and research while also privileging the experiences and identities of voices and people traditionally marginalized. Looking to future documentation projects, and specifically oral histories collected during COVID-19, ACM archivists and NYU Special Collections curators have begun collaborating with NYU-based institutes and community groups. Archivists and curators share draft descriptive policies and gather feedback to ensure community engagement is at the forefront of archival work.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Ref50, Guide to the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection, [http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh\\_014/dscaspace\\_ref408.html#aspace\\_ref50](http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/oh_014/dscaspace_ref408.html#aspace_ref50).

<sup>54</sup> John Hudson, “Looking for the First Use of the Term ‘Illegal Immigrant,’” *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/09/looking-first-use-term-illegal-immigrant/323086/>. Sources cited within place early newspaper publications of “illegal immigrant” in the late 1930s, with the first use of “illegal aliens” in the *New York Times* in 1926.

<sup>55</sup> Library of Congress Subject Authority Cooperative Program, “Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 03,” March 21, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/psd-160321.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Shannon O’Neill and Rachel Searcy, “Righting (and Writing) Wrongs: Reparative Description for Japanese American Wartime Incarceration,” *The Back Table: Archives and Special Collections at New York University*, December 11, 2020, <https://wp.nyu.edu/specialcollections/2020/12/11/righting-and-writing-wrongs-reparative-description-for-japanese-american-wartime-incarceration/>.

## Discussion

Following a structured processing methodology, the project team completed arrangement and description of the collection in two months. The resulting finding aid, at almost 94,000 words, is a robust guide that provides biographical notes and scope-and-contents notes for every interview, as well as additional subject headings for unique topics discussed in individual interviews. With NYU's Blacklight-based discovery interface for archives, biographical and scope-and-contents notes are fully indexed and keyword searchable, with individual interviews being delivered with their collection hierarchy information in search results. Further, as recordings required digitization in order to sample and later provide access to researchers, then-Tamiment Director Timothy Johnson elected to publish streaming versions of these recordings to the finding aid, so discovery and retrieval can both happen within the guide. This decision was weighed against the unsuccessful efforts to locate interviewees or next of kin to secure missing releases and additional permissions for streaming. Ultimately, the interviews are covered by the NYU Special Collections takedown policy if an interviewee or descendent requests removal of the interview or streaming file; takedown and removal requests are always honored, regardless of the presence of a release or deed.

While the processing methodology was intended to find a golden *minimum* for oral history description, the length of time provided for writing and editing led to incredibly detailed interview-level descriptive notes, with scope-and-contents and biographical notes averaging 500 words each. Aiming for both the finding aid as a whole and individual interview descriptions to be easily scanned, this pushed what the project team later considered a reasonable threshold for readers and tipped into maximal description. In successive oral history processing projects, processors were given both a time and word limit, emphasizing brevity and drawing out major and unique concepts of interviews rather than an exhaustive, albeit abstracted, account. Still, the lengthy descriptions do provide enhanced keyword searchability and—combined with additional subject and name headings for each interview—detail that helps represent the uniqueness of each person and their life story conveyed in the oral history.

Prioritizing the processing of this large and long-backlogged oral history collection allowed focused time for needed curation and collection management activities. Dozens of the collection's quarter-inch audio reels were moldy, a condition that was not discovered until preservation and digitization were imminent. In line with the institution's policies on moldy magnetic media, these reels were deaccessioned after preservation treatment and transfer. Tamiment had also received poorly labeled duplicates with the original donation, and these duplicates could not be definitively identified until preservation and description took place concurrently; during quality control, preservation staff could identify groupings of potentially duplicative content, and processors helped to single out best copies of files to retain.

An unintended benefit of approaching this collection as a project with a dedicated team was that processors identified interviews that had been mistakenly added because of lax collection management practices. Post-digitization, each processor was able to identify whole or portions of interviews that did not belong with particular interviewees, either due to mislabeling or because the interviewee was not listed in earlier collection documentation. Gaining cumulative familiarity with the Immigrant Labor History Project interviewers' approach and questions, the processing



team was also able to single out interviews that did not belong to the collection and successfully repatriate the interviews to their rightful collections in Tamiment. Lastly, the project team identified several compilation tapes and radio edits. These remain intact in the collection, and owing to their sampling of the interviews, the team was able to quickly identify the narrators on the tapes, which came with no written documentation about their context.

In the decades between the collection's acquisition and processing, professional standards and practices evolved, both for collection management generally and for oral history specifically at Tamiment. This evolution highlighted the divergence between past and current practice, especially as Tamiment had embraced oral history as a documentary strategy with little to no resources to support the stewardship of these acquisitions. Issues like the missing interviewee releases—which would benefit from considerable revision even when extant—raised questions for the processing team about the overall ethics of proceeding with the project. While curatorial and collection management practices have changed even since the time of the project, two important facts remain: the backlog of unprocessed collections is still considerable, and ACM and Tamiment can continually learn from the decisions made during prior projects, even from the recent past, to inform future work.

With completion of the finding aid, digitization of all audio recordings, and the availability of transcripts noted, the New York Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection was fully opened and discoverable to researchers. Since 2018, all recordings have been available to stream on the open web via the finding aid. As of 2021, the finding aid is the fifth most consulted for Tamiment out of over 1,450 finding aids online total; the top ten finding aids represent the most frequently requested collections in the reading room and the few collections for which online access is available through the finding aid. User requests for reading room access increased considerably after the finding aid's initial publication, then dropped considerably after streaming access was enabled. User inquiries since the time of streaming publication have primarily focused on requests for files for re-use, such as transcripts and digital copies of recordings. Given that the collection went from undiscoverable to fully accessible online, and that it continues to be used online with a high degree of frequency, both Tamiment and ACM consider the description to be successful at providing a broad range of access, coupled with reparative refinements to language that ACM will continue to add over time.

## **Conclusion**

The impetus for this research was to solidify a descriptive approach for a large and complex oral history collection, to ensure that processing proceeded efficiently and with respect for the narrators and the communities they represent. True to the spirit of cultural humility and an ethics of care, these lines of inquiry soon grew to encompass care and respect for communities represented in the records, beyond the interviewees' words alone. Archivists also relied on professional judgment when changing the direct words of interviewees in description, whether referring to their own experiences ("illegal immigration") or others (interracial conflict and racist attitudes). It is an important reminder that description—crafted by archivists who draw on their own experiences, biases, and learning—is not transcription automated by machines. Transcripts remain critical to providing full accessibility to recordings, and rather than being limited by their inability to convey affect, emotion, context, and nuance, they stand to be greatly enhanced by archival description.

The original oral history record can and should always be preserved in a transcript, and archival description should not just be responsive to expected user search strategies: it should also maintain respect and inclusiveness in its representation of traditionally marginalized groups, even as that representation needs to evolve over time.

The successful completion of processing the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection affirmatively answered whether oral history could be processed both efficiently and inclusively. However, relative success of the latter is reliant upon archivists' and repositories' willingness to engage with positionality and continually reexamine and question assumptions about language, identities, and description. That is to say the successes of inclusive archival description practices are wholly dependent on implementation of an iterative, reparative program. While the 218 interviewees in the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project formed a large, heterogenous group that inherently highlighted the difficulty in finding singular representative voices for communities, research into how individuals and communities wish to be identified and described is nonetheless achievable, and eminently so for more cohesive collections, or when partnering with oral historians early in their documentation projects. This project laid the groundwork for conversations in ACM about how to approach community-guided description, even with community members who were long deceased. While the inclusive descriptive methodology was rooted in the New York City Immigrant Labor History Project Oral History Collection, it is now a foundational practice that archivists carry into their work with all archival materials at NYU Special Collections.