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Doing Oral History as Public Anthropology

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Doing Oral History engages students as co-researchers in a community-engaged oral history project begun in 2011. Supported by a research partnership between a faculty member, a university oral history center, and a non-profit archive, the course engages learners in the exploration of a festival and its communities. Through oral histories with long-time festival workers, artists, staff, volunteers, and neighbors, we contribute to expanding the history of a festival and the social movements that have shaped it. We also consider the ways in which diverse festival workers come to feel a part of a community centering African American working-class folk, cultures, and performance traditions. Students learn from narrators connected to the festival, recording their life histories, and learning about neighborhood and city history, cultural traditions, and social movements. These oral histories engage the complex racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies which the festival reflects, the central place of folklore and cultural heritage in the public culture of the region, and the challenges of making a living in a precarious tourism economy. In this article, I reflect on how the class contributes to doing and teaching public anthropology in the South. [community-engaged research, service-learning, oral history, public anthropology, social justice, New Orleans]

Introduction

For over a decade, I have been teaching a class called Doing Oral History as part of a community partnership that invites students into anthropological practice while engaging with research ethics, social theory, race, cultural heritage, and public history. The class and the larger project both engage with festival publics and seek to engender new understandings through the sharing of life narratives around a public festival. Taken together, oral histories recorded as part of the class contribute to expanding the archive of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and New Orleans

cultural history writ large. In this article, I reflect on how the class contributes to doing and teaching public anthropology in the South.

In their collection, *Anthropology Off the Shelf*, Maria Vesperi and Alisse Waterston (2011, 6) seek to “enlarge anthropology’s potential to provide accessible, in-depth information and analysis about things that are amiss in the world.” Building on scholarship in public anthropology, I join Luke Eric Lassiter, Les Field, and others who argue for a greater role for critical humanistic and collaborative scholarship in a field that has often centered labor, public health, immigration, and political economic analysis (Field 2005; Lassiter 2005; see Abu-Lughod 2016; Clarke 2010; Low and Merry 2010; Peacock 1997). Through a collective practice of doing oral history, the class contributes to public history and challenges dominant narratives about who has contributed to the making of the festival and the public culture of the city. The history of the Jazz Fest matters because it is entangled in the larger story of the city and region. In particular, the festival story involves desegregation of public accommodations and public space, the growth of cultural heritage tourism, voting rights, and the rise of Black political power in a majority black city and efforts to increase the role of Black people in economic development – including music and tourism industries – and the place of African American social actors in the making of this history (see Apter 2005; Grazian 2003; Jacobs 2001; Probst 2011). Anthropologists have a role to play in setting the record straight and diversifying the narrative (Bolles 2013; Flores 2002; Trouillot 1995). Through centering diverse narratives and creating exhibits that engage specific publics, anthropologists can contribute to work that centers previously marginalized voices in the making of public culture in the US South.

This article also contributes to scholarship on community-engagement in university teaching, often termed “service-learning” or “community-engaged learning.” A major challenge in courses that seek to involve students in community-engaged research is related to the timeframe of the academic semester for any meaningful fieldwork in community (Simonelli 2011). I argue that oral history, when it builds on long-term ethnography, can make a meaningful contribution, generating a research product that is legible to community narrators and feasible during an academic semester. In addition to creating primary documents accessible to scholars and community members, oral history projects can also engage with specific publics, serving as a foundation for public events, panels, or

exhibits that share research with community partners. Over time, oral histories can generate lively conversations, animating debate in a fragmented public sphere. In a society that is socially and spatially segregated and marked by growing inequality, first person narratives have the potential to cross social divides. More, they have the power to move us, as readers and listeners. As Howard Zinn put it, “There is knowing and there is knowing and there is knowing” (2011, 20). Zinn was writing of knowledge that stays with you, so that it is not possible to just move on. Oral histories have this potential. In this way, community-engaged teaching can contribute to public scholarship.

This essay is organized in three parts: The first section recounts the background of the project, the history of the partnership, and how I came to teach this class. Second, I consider the process of creating oral histories and two specific examples of community engagement through doing oral history. The third section reflects on how this practice builds on and contributes to an expansive understanding of public anthropology.

Part One: Background and History of the Partnership

I first got involved with research at Jazz Fest through my work with parades, specifically second-line parades organized through the streets of New Orleans by African American Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs), with their roots in nineteenth century benevolent societies and mutual aid organizations (Jacobs 2001; Regis 1999, 2001). Unlike the better-known carnival (or Mardi Gras) parades, second lines are highly participatory and move through the city’s historically Black working-class neighborhoods, transforming public spaces with performances that enact beauty, power, dignity, and solidarity, while speaking to contemporary issues facing city residents. As a result of the massive displacements wrought by the 2005 levee failures, disaster capitalism, federal housing policy (Hope VI), the demolition of public housing, the closing of charity hospital, and the loss of 100,000 African American people from the city, historic neighborhoods have been reworked beyond recognition in many parts of the city (Adams 2013; Arena 2012; Blumenfeld 2022; Breunlin and Regis 2006; Lipsitz 2006; Thomas 2014; Woods 2017). Gentrification hardly begins to capture the profound social, demographic, and cultural changes that have taken place.

Amid these challenges, parades bring people together, generating feelings of connection, belonging, and joy, and transforming neighborhoods. Researching parades revealed widespread misunderstandings and misrepresentations in news media and tourist spaces. Seeking to understand the difference between community-led parades and tourist performances – what I saw as real versus fake parades – brought me to Jazz Fest, where second-line parades have been such a prominent inspiration that they appear on the festival logo. At Jazz Fest, thousands of people are introduced to parades that wind through the gated space of the festival. The event brings both visitors and residents into shared spaces with second lines, as well as Black Masking Indians (Mardi Gras Indians), visual artists, craft demonstrators, and musicians, generating powerful feelings of connection, solidarity, and even transcendence (Regis and Walton 2008; Regis and Walton 2023; Walton 2012). A large body of recent scholarship on tourism, complicates the binary between authentic (the real) and tourist performance. Learning from Ed Bruner (2004) and others who have considered indigenous perspectives on the meaning of sharing culture cross-culturally has contributed to my growing understanding of the agency of cultural actors in making decisions about whether or how to share their culture with outsiders and in non-traditional spaces. The Festival was a prime site for learning about this process.

In the early 2000s, I partnered with a colleague, Shana Walton, to study the festival. We started to explore the festival archive, pouring over old scrapbooks and folders of press clippings, we were struck by the contested accounts of how the festival originated. We were interested in thinking through how traditional or “folk” cultures were transformed through public display, and how new traditions were being created at this event, whose structures of production were having year-round impacts on the city. The two-week event bridging April and May has an economic impact of more than 300 million dollars, and its social and cultural impact is even greater. We became increasingly concerned with the relations of production and the lived experience of festival workers, from those who built the stages to those performing their music, dance, crafts, and narratives. At this time, we discovered that the Jazz & Heritage Archive was starting its own oral history program, to document the early history of the festival and to interview longtime board members. We realized we could both contribute to the archive’s research program and advance our own projects. In 2010, we met with the non-profit Jazz & Heritage Foundation’s executive director and the archivist and outlined a three-year research

partnership. We identified three major areas of collaboration: (1) the experiences of festival goers (or fans) and their traditions; (2) the life stories and experiences of festival workers, particularly artists and folk demonstrators, and others who were rarely featured in news stories about the festival; and (3) Congo Square, the Black art marketplace within the festival that had been created as “a festival within a festival” as the result of a social movement for greater inclusion, participation, and equity in the city’s public spaces and institutions – led by the Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition.

In 2011, I taught Doing Life History for the first time. In preparation for the class, I reached out to friends and contacts within the festival organization who could recommend people to interview. The Foundation’s archivist and I drafted a list of potential interviewees. The goal of the class project: to expand the festival archive, recoding a greater diversity of narrators on festival history, its social and cultural impact, and its role in the lives of diverse participants. The archivist did the initial outreach, and I followed up and handed each student a contact – usually a name and a phone number and not much background information about them except their role and the number of years they had been on staff. Since then, I’ve taught the class every other year, and its curriculum has evolved with my growing knowledge of the field.

To explain how this project has been able to function, it is necessary to say a bit more about our partners at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation. (I write more about the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at LSU in the section on curriculum). At the Foundation, our primary thought partner has been the archivist. Rachel Lyons joined the Jazz & Heritage Foundation as its Archivist in 2000. In 2004, she launched an oral history project to document the history of the festival. In 2019, she worked with Smithsonian Folkways Recordings to produce a box set, *Jazz Fest: The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival* for the fiftieth anniversary, drawing from the archive’s extensive audio, photography, and oral history collections. In 2020 and 2021, when the festival was unable to take place, she co-produced *Festing in Place*, an eight-day broadcast by WWOZ community radio featuring over 100 archival Jazz Fest performances which streamed around the world to listeners in 195 countries and territories. From the start of the partnership, our goal has been to build on the festival archive and create a publicly accessible resource, which could serve as a springboard for future work. I return to this point in the conclusion.

Part Two: Process & Product – Creating Life Histories

The Curriculum

I began by adapting the syllabus from a colleague, Jeffrey Ehrenreich, who was teaching a Life History class at UNO, drawing heavily from his knowledge of the classical life history tradition in anthropology with Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder: Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*, Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days*, Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola*, and journalistic accounts like Studs Terkel's *Working*. Ehrenreich was trained in the radical humanism and political economy of anthropology at the New School for Social Research (Breunlin et al. 2018). Over time, I experimented with different contemporary texts, such as John Chernoff's *Hustling is not Stealing* and Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Every year we read something new. In 2022, we read *Sweet Tea*, an oral history of Black gay men in the South, and *Guantanamo Voices*, a graphic anthology of oral histories from Guantanamo (Johnson 2008; Mirk 2020). These texts demonstrate the power of oral history and ethnographic life narratives to illuminate moral economies of frontline workers (Chernoff 2003), entangled dilemmas of human rights advocates, attorneys, and prisoners (Mirk 2020), the distinctive intersectional experiences of Black gay men in the South (Johnson 2008), and the power of women's healing networks to bridge a transnational community (Brown 1991). While the class is different every time, the syllabus always includes classic oral histories and ethnographic life histories (Myerhoff 1978; Terkel 1974), experimental texts (Behar 2004; Chernoff 2003) and more recent anthologies (Johnson 2008; Mirk 2020; Stephen 2013) addressing specific publics. In addition, the class leans heavily on documentary films and shorter readings on New Orleans culture to provide social and historical context (Breunlin 2013; Dent 2018; Jacobs 2001; Nesbitt 1998; Nine Times 2006; Thomas 2014).

After teaching the class the first time, I realized students needed more background about the history of the festival and the vernacular cultures that are at its center, particularly Black Masking Indians (also known as Mardi Gras Indians) and Social Aid and Pleasure Club parades. They also needed to grasp the historic role of the festival in transforming the tourism industry in the city, including the growth of cultural heritage tourism and the growing focus on music, visual arts and, of course, the food. In particular, the Festival has played a key role in fostering the growth of

Black-centered African American heritage tourism in the city, with its vindicationist narrative centering Black musicians whose recognition – as artists, innovators, creators of American popular music – was long overdue.

A complete account of festival history and its role in the city is beyond the scope of this article. Several publications touch on this history from the producers' point of view (McCaffery 2005; Place et al. 2019; Wein 2003), erasing or downplaying the subaltern histories of Black artists and activists who contributed to its founding and fought to transform the festival in the 1970s. However, the complexity of that story is at the center of the public scholarship and community engagement of this class. Through oral history, the class aims to contribute to diversifying the narrative about the festival, and more broadly who makes things happen in the city. Whose expertise, community-based cultural knowledge, and agency has helped to transform the festival and cultural industries to where they are today? Among the major actors are the well-known producers of the festival. But theirs is not the whole story.

And here is where this class can be distinguished from many other oral history classes, service-learning classes, and from one-off projects. The course builds on and contributes to a long-term ethnographic project on the public culture of the city. The challenge then, and a strength of the class, is to find a way to share a maximum amount of information, while also training students in the theory and methods of oral history practice with attention to research ethics. The class aims to introduce students to the real challenges and opportunities they might face if (or when) they go on to create oral history projects of their own. While the class was initially designed for undergraduates, a growing number of graduate students have enrolled, several of whom were actively developing dissertation proposals incorporating oral history in their projects.

To deepen my own (and the students') training in oral history methodology, I co-taught the class several times with Jennifer A. Cramer, Director of the Williams Center for Oral History at LSU, who contributed to elevating our recording and interviewing techniques, sound quality and provided a professional oral historian's perspective on best practices, ethics, and professionalism. As an anthropologist and an ethnographer, I found that I didn't always *agree* with the specific take of oral historians, but we always had great discussions, especially regarding ethical dimensions of research and the politics of oral history (OHA 2022). I think the students got a lot

out of hearing more than one perspective – even seeing their instructors respectfully disagree on some issues.

The curriculum of the class has evolved over time. To help prepare students to do their own interviews, we now screen a series of videos of oral histories created by the Foundation, which we discuss extensively. Students also audit, review, and analyze oral histories created by previous classes. They analyze these both for the content and for the method – noting great moments and missed opportunities. They are quick to find mistakes and awkward moments in these interviews, but also lots of great material. As the instructor, I strive to balance student critiques with the reassurance that even imperfect oral histories have value, pointing out how much they are learning from the transcripts they critique. Drawing from Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1993) notion of “good enough ethnography,” I advocate for good enough oral history. These student audits perform two functions. First, these oral histories help to expand students' understanding of the role of the festival in people's lives and the complex social issues that are raised in the narratives. Second, close reading of the transcripts helps expand students' understanding of interviewing as a vital and imperfect research practice. They take notes, observe how a conversation unfolds, the turning points, and missed opportunities. In their reports, students craft follow-up questions they would like to ask a narrator. In some cases, students have been able to record follow-up conversations, effectively extending, and deepening the narratives. This has helped to provide some of the substance that can be generated by long-term ethnographic life histories – a depth that is difficult to duplicate in a one-semester class (Simonelli 2011).

In class discussions of readings, films, and oral histories, I encourage students to draw on their personal experience and to consider the strengths and limitations of the situated knowledge they bring into the classroom. As we screen films and oral histories and as we unpack the implicit knowledge, social structures, ideologies, and the ways of speaking of particular narrators, students notice how their own personal backgrounds can shape their ability to interpret the material and how it affects their personal responses – in particular how they *feel* about it. We talk about race and gender, of course, but also age, class, education, geography, occupation, ethnicity, citizenship, and national belonging. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994, 90) evokes “that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing – that is, a privileged standpoint.” Working from this insight, I encourage students to learn from each other as well as

from course materials. She writes, “I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build ‘community’ in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor” (hooks 1994, 40). Reflexive writing exercises and journal prompts further encourage students’ reflection and self-knowledge. This becomes especially important since the practice of oral history relies on the interviewer’s ability, as co-creator of the oral history, to listen deeply, to ask good follow-up questions, and to learn to pivot as needed in mid-conversation. This approach is informed by Charles Briggs’ insightful discussion of the ethnographic interview as a culturally specific form of discourse and knowledge production (Briggs 1986; di Leonardo 1987; Leavey 2011; Rosaldo 1980).

Much of the joy and the challenge of teaching this class is to provide enough cultural and historical background on the city and its festival to prepare students to be competent interlocutors. This works to balance substantive subject-area competence with the need to provide students with adequate understanding of the methods, theory, and practice of oral history, both as it is practiced by anthropologists, when it is often embedded in ethnographic projects, and as practiced by historians and community organizations, often as stand-alone projects. This could certainly be a two-semester class. Another element of the class that is both a strength and a limiting factor is the trepidation a faculty member might experience as an ethnographer bringing students into their long-term field site. While this is the norm for archaeology field schools, it remains far less common in cultural anthropology. This inevitably presents certain risks for the faculty member/researcher whose rapport with community members has been built up over years. What if, for example, a student is rude to a valued community partner or an oral history interview is botched? Such concerns also impact our primary institutional partner, the Jazz & Heritage Archive. Since they provide introductions to people selected for interviews, they understandably could have some concerns about having the recording of a valued colleague entrusted to a student. In truth, even the most seasoned oral historians and ethnographers can make mistakes: a recording fails, or the interviewer makes another error. Furthermore, students as learners can often help narrators explain things they wouldn’t think to do in conversation with a veteran researcher or a festival insider. Such accounts can unpack fundamental, taken-for-granted realities illuminating narrators’ worldviews, social structures, and histories.

Process & Products

The process of creating oral histories in the class is comprised of three phases outlined in table 1. Since 2011 we have recorded over 50 oral history interviews and generated over 1000 pages of transcripts. We've talked to artists, craft vendors from jewelers to soap makers and quilters, food vendors, stage managers, volunteers, riggers, electricians, and members of the construction crew who build the festival over a period of six weeks in March and April. The oral histories themselves are archived at LSU's Williams Center for Oral History in Baton Rouge and the Jazz & Heritage Foundation in New Orleans and they constitute the primary research product.

Table 1. Process of oral history creation
Phase 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regis works with community partners to develop a list of potential interviewees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partner/Regis do first outreach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students follow up and set up day/time for interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student works with interviewees to develop a list of topics
Phase 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students work in pairs to meet with narrators to record oral history
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tech-support person (a fellow student) manages recording, takes photos, suggests follow-up questions, and makes sure release forms get signed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students transcribe & produce draft transcripts for review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow-up with narrators by phone or e-mail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Return transcript to narrators for corrections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Revise transcript for deposit with Williams Center for Oral History
Phase 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students pull quotes and create a 3-minute clip
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflect on their experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share with class in oral presentations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Write thank you notes

Some of these narratives stand out for the way they illuminate festival history and show how narrators shape the public dimensions of this

work. I now turn to (and briefly discuss) two accounts from Geraldine Vaucresson and Philip “Popcorn” Ganier. Geraldine Vaucresson is a member of a prominent Afro-Creole family. Her husband was a founding vendor and theirs is one of the longest running food booths at the Festival. It turns out she was one of the first Black graduate students at LSU in the 1950s in library sciences. She desegregated the New Orleans Public Library System and told us about meeting Dr. Martin Luther King when she was an undergraduate at Spelman. Her husband was the first African American to own a restaurant in that section of the French Quarter.

They had never had a Black have a business down there. And Larry [Borenstein] decided he wanted my husband to come and open up Café Creole. Which we did. And whites down there knew my husband, so they had no objection. They said this was it. There will never be another one. We know him, blah blah.

You know, that was the place where Jazz Fest originated, in that restaurant. [George Wein] was sitting in there with my husband [and] Larry Borenstein. . . .

Wein was the founding executive director of the festival, who had set up a series of meetings with local people to plan the event. Those early meetings were legendary. Allison Miner and Quint Davis were recruited to work for Wein at one of these meetings. “We didn’t get paid that first year,” recalled Miner. “But we had some wonderful meals” (Nesbit 1998). Larry Borenstein, along with Alan Jaffe, was a founder of Preservation Hall, another cultural institution concerned with fostering the transmission of traditional New Orleans jazz (and that, from its inception, pushed the boundaries of segregation). These figures are often named in origin stories and credited with contributing to the festival concept. Jazz Fest would be more than a series of concerts. It would also feature the musical and cultural heritage of the city which could be found nowhere else in the United States – Gospel and R & B, the music of Mardi Gras Indians, and the Brass Bands that power second line parades. The food would be real New Orleans food, not typical festival fare. As one narrator put it, there is not a corn dog to be found among the food vendors.

Listening to Mrs. Vaucresson, we began to see how very different stories of the festival’s origins could be heard from different narrators –

particularly African American entrepreneurs, musicians, and intellectuals who had been there at the beginning and who were often uncredited for their contributions to the festival concept. “George Wein was sitting there with my husband,” she remembers. Through her telling of that scene, she suggests that not only was her husband there, but that Mr. Wein got more from that conversation than a good meal. Mr. Wein was doing fieldwork at that restaurant. He was immersing himself in New Orleans culture and designing the festival concept. Mrs. Vaucresson was interviewed by undergraduate Kelsey Jones in 2013 and two years later by Kristie Nguyen, a PhD student in Educational Leadership who wanted to learn more about her experience with the desegregation of graduate education at LSU.

The Vaucresson story was also told to us through her son Vance Vaucresson, who now runs the family business. Douglas Mungin, a PhD student in Communication Studies, wrote this about what he learned:

I am interested in the power of narrative in constructing community identity in regards to Jazz Fest due to the numerous narratives of individuals taking a share of credit in creating Jazz Fest. My first introduction to this was when Vance Vaucresson stated that Jazz Fest was the creation of Black small businesses. Later on, through the documents and documentaries that we have seen in the class, almost every group has laid a claim to this creation. This past week highlighted this tale when in my oral history interview with Philip “Popcorn” Ganier he stated that the origins of Jazz Fest came from the Lower Ninth Ward. Community identity is shaped through the narrative of the creation of Jazz Fest with these narrators marking the importance of their own history. (Mungin 2014)

Doug did a follow-up interview with Mr. Philip “Popcorn” Garnier for his project, building on a shorter interview recorded in 2011. Mr. Ganier put it like this:

When you work with people like that, you don't mind doing a lot of things. But I don't like nobody coming in and taking credit for something you did, the hard work you did and everything else. You came from the ground up doing this and that. But you know they're going to take credit from you, a lot of things you do.

Mr. Garnier has been involved in multiple dimensions of building the infrastructure for the festival over the years, as a member of the site crew. Hailing from Plaquemines Parish southeast of New Orleans, Mr. Garnier's family resettled in the Lower Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that entered the national spotlight in the aftermath of the federal levee failures of 2005, and that is better known locally for its history of organizing, from the labor unions of longshoremen and streetcar workers to the Black Panthers and the Free Southern Theater (Breunlin and Lewis 2009). He talked proudly of his community's traditions of growing, harvesting, and sharing food – especially the abundance of oysters, crabs, shrimp, and fish in Louisiana's coastal region. The can-do attitude of self-provisioning and mutual aid contributes to a sense of self-sufficiency and collective agency that is prominent in narratives of social movements (see Regis and Walton, in press). These social and political histories are often outside the frame of official accounts of the festival's roots, accounts that center African American cultural and performance traditions (and the clubs that create them) but rarely include the political dimensions of organizing histories.

Through a series of exhibits and events, some of these oral histories have moved into the public sphere. In 2016, Jennifer Cramer, who co-taught the class with me, curated an exhibit from student interviews, *Jazz Fest 101: Student Oral History Research*. This exhibit, which was created for the Hill Memorial Library at LSU, was an effective way to showcase the involvement of students in public scholarship. However, because LSU's main campus is located 75 miles from New Orleans, it could not be a venue for bringing together our community narrators. We were able to achieve this in another exhibit, *Creating Congo Square: Jazz Fest and Black Power* (2015), which took place in New Orleans at the Jazz & Heritage Foundation Gallery and chronicled the social movement that contested the festival's production structures in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2019, for the fiftieth anniversary of the festival, we built an oral history booth and set it up in the center of the Folklife Village. We recorded over 90 interviews in eight days – many of them short but some running nearly an hour long. There were so many people wanting to be interviewed we had to turn people away. These recordings might not have the same deliberate or contemplative quality as those made in someone's home, but they allowed us to rapidly reach a broad swath of people we likely wouldn't have met otherwise. In this case, students were witnessing the public performance of doing oral history.

Part Three: How Is This Public Anthropology?

My understanding of the publics for this work has been shaped by long-term archival and ethnographic research in the city. In Spring 2015, Walton and I curated an exhibit in partnership with members of the Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition, founders of the area now known as Congo Square. We began by talking with current vendors in this section of Jazz Fest featuring music, crafts, and art from Africa and the African Diaspora. We planned to create an exhibit that featured the richness and diversity of arts and people that make Congo Square so vibrant, engaging, and relevant. We also wanted to showcase the stories of people who were involved in founding this space of self-representation and self-reliance.

The exhibit opened in April 2015 to a packed room of movement elders, narrators, and their families and friends. We had several hundred people come to the exhibit – mostly people invited by the narrators. Among the attendees were members of the public and the festival staff. One of them, who works in the crafts area of the festival turned to me and said in a hushed voice, “I had no idea.” She’d been working at the festival for more than ten years. The experience of working on this exhibit with movement elders and hearing this comment from a longtime worker reinforced our intuition that this history was not widely known – even among festival staff. This is astonishing when you consider that the festival, over five decades, has been curating and telling a version of its history at the festival, in program books, staff meetings, and public exhibits. The festival has a significant public platform for narrating its own history. And somehow, this pivotal moment in the festival’s becoming had been submerged, if not erased, in a way that is undeniable.

Ann Kingsolver, a contributor to this special issue, has written of the significance of creating public exhibits that tell a fuller and more inclusive public history of the places where we live, work, and do research, particularly the racialized histories of land (settlement, displacement, dispossession) and labor, including the enslavement of African people, the exploitation that continued through Jim Crow, accounts that make visible the influence of white supremacy, and strategies to create families and livelihoods in the face of these challenges, including social movements for freedom and equality (Kingsolver et al. 2023). As Kingsolver and colleagues make clear, this work takes place in a social and political context where the silencing of these histories is ongoing. Teaching Doing Oral

History, working in partnership with cultural organizations, collaborating with community narrators and movement elders, and creating public exhibits based on this work can also contribute to this effort to create more inclusive public histories.

These endeavors help to expand the frame of what is often considered to be public anthropology. One major initiative, The California Series in Public Anthropology series launched by Robert Borofsky in 2001, is primarily aimed at college classes and educated readers. The list of works embraces issues of public concern, including migrant farmworkers, efforts to rebuild South Africa after apartheid, war and other forms of violence, environmental racism, health inequity, the opioid crisis, and the drug trade. The list revolves around health, migration, and violence and places medical anthropology at the center. These social issues are defined largely through a political economic lens. These are books that I value and that I have taught in my own classes. The series appears to be aimed at shaping public awareness and informing discussions around policy – laudable goals, to be sure. Yet, a number of issues are currently left out of Borovsky’s project: tourism, the precarious cultural economy, and critical perspectives on heritage, authenticity, commodification, and belonging – issues which are of public concern in New Orleans. All of these social fields intersect with issues about labor, migration, public policy, public space, and health inequities – and make few appearances in the Public Anthropology series.

Recent work by Carole McGranahan and others extends the scope of public anthropology in important ways (Cole 2013; McGranahan 2006). Much of this work is informed by community partners (narrators) and the resulting research products are “legible” and useful in the community (Lassiter 2005; Waterston and Vesperi 2011). My understanding of what public scholarship looks like – and what it can be – has been informed by the work of the Neighborhood Story Project (NSP), led by Rachel Breunlin (2013, 2020), where I serve as a board member (currently board president). The NSP’s work is deliberately and rigorously collaborative, in the sense envisioned by Luke Eric Lassiter (2005), so that the research questions, research, writing, and publications are conceived together. In *The Other Side of Middletown*, Lassiter and colleagues (2004) involved students, faculty, and community members working side-by-side to frame the project, carry out the research, interpret their findings, and edit the writing (see also Field 2008). Such projects are immersive and require significant time and resources. They are difficult to reproduce in the context of semester-long

courses. One administrator at Wake Forest, when Jeanne Simonelli was on the faculty, expressed concern with a local community organization's strategy for organizing because it was "very process oriented and often time consuming . . . this model is difficult for the academic calendar, at least in many instances" (2011, 48). Indeed! Here is where oral history provides a framework for collaboration in the short-term that can become the basis for longer-term partnerships. The task of recording, transcribing, and editing one oral history interview – while arduous – is achievable in a single semester.

A brief note on how this work is framed at the University. Doing Oral History is registered as a Service-Learning course, my institution's framework for community-engaged teaching and research. This language around "service-learning" carries an unwieldy cargo and has undesired connotations for community engagement framed as public scholarship. In an article reflecting on her university's engagement through museum exhibits and doing research centering community partners, Simonelli (2011, 48) wrote of the need to break out of the service-learning mindset wherein "students are still stuck in the rut of 'helping those less fortunate' and directors are tied to a project model that fits into an academic semester." For faculty involving students in doing engaged research, the category of "service" also works to devalue public engagement through language that is inevitably gendered as well.

Whose Jazz Fest, Whose Anthropology?

In their book *Contesting Publics*, Sally Cole and colleagues (2013, 138) interrogate both the creation of publics and the production of public scholarship in anthropology. "We find the idea of the public has not been theorized but is assumed as a known and unified space." They continue: "What is called public anthropology is a product of quite different relationships to economic resources, political power, ethical obligations, and political responsibilities and allegiances" (Cole et al. 2013, 139). In the South, scholars in public and private universities may be reckoning with very different sets of expectations, resources, and risks in doing this work (see Daria et al., this issue). "Ethical issues are central to public anthropology," they write, prompting the question: "For whom is knowledge being produced?" (Cole et al. 2013, 142). This generative question compels another: What are the publics invoked by Doing Oral History in New Orleans and specifically at Jazz Fest?

In my own experience doing oral history and researching parades and festivals – themselves sites for generating publics – there are multiple and differently positioned groups with a stake in the representation of festival histories. As Muhammed Yungai (2015) told it,

The Jazz Festival is an institution
 whose reason for being
 Is basically the culture of Black people in America.

So it's founded on Black culture,
 but the Black artists, artisans, and people
 that were actually making a living
 selling things that we made,
 were pretty much being rejected.

These rejections, with African American artists and vendors being denied admission into the festival's craft areas, were the primary impetus for an organizing effort that eventually included musicians, artists, food vendors, members of social clubs, and Black Masking Indians.

The Jazz Festival Coalition itself was involved in organizing and demonstrating that they had a stake in the decisions being made at the festival. They formed a 'public' and proposed to hold the festival publicly accountable. They were able to persuade city leaders and festival producers that they should have a seat at the table (and on the board). As some of these movement elders retire from the board, there continues to be a great deal at stake in the telling of this history. According to Bill Rouselle, an activist and journalist who joined the festival board in the late 1970s, one of the developments that eventually emerged, and a direct result of this activism, was that the foundation board developed a fifty-fifty composition and a process for shared governance, becoming a model for other non-profits in the city. While the Coalition clearly and unequivocally constitutes a particular public, there are other emergent publics among the narrators of festival history. As the accounts of Mrs. Vaucresson and Mr. Garnier reveal, narrating their role in festival history is one way in which community members have come to make claims on Jazz Fest and the public culture of the city.

Festival histories intersect with other histories, such as the dismantling of social safety nets and privatization of many public goods, whether through the demolition of public housing, the closing of Charity

Hospital, the restructuring of public schools, and the intensification of social inequality in the United States. As George Lipsitz (2006) has argued, the public policies deployed in the months after Hurricane Katrina enacted a massive reallocation of resources from the public sphere to the private sector. Doing Oral History at Jazz Fest contributes to telling this story as well. When specific networks are involved in oral histories, their narratives become more than the sum of their parts. As a constellation of voices, experiences, knowledges, understandings of the world that are always potentially or explicitly political, they advance foundational perspectives that both reflect, and embody a specific public (see Franzen 2013). Recording these narratives has the potential to extend their presence in situated, intersectional histories, creating a resource for those who constitute themselves as festival publics and thus may make claims on it and other public institutions in the future.

Conclusion: Community Engagement with Emergent Publics

At a recent symposium on community-engagement in science education, Daniel Aguirre expressed skepticism about what passes as community engagement in many museums and non-profits. “I’ve been called a community engagement expert,” he said, explaining that he no longer considers what he does community engagement. Rather, he is interested in building deep, lasting community relationships. “Those relationships,” he said, “are built on trust: earning it, building it, and sustaining it.” Relationships are not just between people. They are between people and history (Aguirre 2022). Aguirre’s incisive perspective could apply to university-based community engagement as well.

Public anthropology must be accountable and responsible through skillful facilitation and stewardship of relationships that extend beyond the framework of the academic year. It also requires robust practices of accountability to community partners and emergent publics for our work. Simonelli (2011) writes of the need to craft “a new peer review” as an integral part of doing publicly engaged scholarship. I agree. That’s why scholars have been experimenting with expanded forms of peer review for collaborative anthropology and public scholarship (Breunlin 2020). Traditional forms of academic peer review are insufficient. In some cases, they may even be damaging to public scholarship. If public scholarship is to be truly accountable to publics beyond the university, it must be accountable in concrete ways. If it is to truly “count” in the academy, it must

also be recognized by the institutions in which we work (Bennett and Khanna 2010). Strategies for creating such structures of accountability include creating community book committees, vetting drafts with both individual contributors and book committees, and editing the texts (and images) together (Lassiter 2011). In this project, we work with individual narrators to co-create oral histories and to collaboratively edit their transcripts and pull-quotes for exhibits. Lassiter writes that “the time is ripe for us to develop the potential for writing texts that speak even more directly to the consultants’ concerns” (Lassiter 2011, 97). This necessarily involves speaking to specific publics and being accountable to specific communities, in what Lassiter calls a “grassroots public anthropology.” Our publics include these collaborators, as well as the Jazz & Heritage Foundation, the veterans of the Afrikan American Jazz Festival Coalition, founders of Koindu and Congo Square at the Festival, artists, vendors, volunteers, and members of the staff, and larger fest-going publics – including those who have attended our exhibits and panel discussions – and all those who care about festival histories. As we work to compile these oral histories into an anthology, we hope to widen these publics further. This is the path to “building a public anthropology from the ground up and from the center out” (Lassiter 2011, 97).

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