

HOW TO DO A STUDENT ORGANIZING ORAL HISTORY



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WHAT IS THIS ?

This is a guide for student organizers interested in using oral history as an organizing tool for knowledge production, relationship-building, and strategy-making. Oral history is not just something that sits in the archive waiting to be taken up—oral history can be used for collective action. This zine acts as a guide for how to complete an oral history of organizing within and against institutional power; specifically, how to make sure this process is centered around collecting a useful past for an actionable present.

“Oral history as a practice refers to both the **interview process and the output** that emerges from it... Oral historians might record interviews focused on narrators’ **life histories or topical interviews** in which narrators are selected for their knowledge of a particular historical subject or event. The value of oral history lies largely in the way it **helps to place people’s experiences within a larger social and historical context**, and conversely, to **contextualize social and historical events through how people lived them.**” - Oral History Association (OHA)

HOW DID THIS START?

The Barnard/Columbia Student Organizing Oral History Project began as an idea in the fall of 2023 as student organizing on campus exploded against the genocide in Gaza. At the time, student organizers were hungry for lessons from previous divestment campaigns on Columbia/Barnard’s campuses—most potently from the successful divestment campaign against apartheid South Africa in the 70s and 80s, as well as the 1968 occupation of campus over the University’s complicity in the Vietnam War and their looming takeover of Morningside Park and extractive encroachment into Black Harlem. These are important and inspiring histories for students, staff, and faculty, but I knew there were more (and more recent!) histories of student resistance to institutional injustice and complicity in harmful systems of power. I thought that student movements that had happened on Barnard/Columbia’s campus in the last decade or so could provide as much useful information as famous campaigns of the last century—especially given how much universities as institutions have changed in a relatively short amount of time. Contemporary social movements require new lessons on how to navigate and challenge contemporary institutional power.

ORAL HISTORY VS. INTERVIEW

Interviews are generally intended to gain specific information from an interviewee, often to be used for/in a larger project by the interviewer (think of a journalist interviewing a source). In that kind of interview, the interviewer will likely be incredibly direct with their questions, looking for specific answers; the interview will be entirely directed by the interviewer.

Oral history interviews are intended to be a primary source document, not directly used for another end. Oral history interviewers should come with broader questions, no specific answers in mind, and be open to being guided by what the narrator (the interviewee of an oral history) thinks is important. This is a process that is meant to be dynamic and collaborative: **"narrators shape the interview based on what they deem to be relevant, meaningful, or appropriate to share,"** (Oral History Association).

That does not mean, however, that the interviewer shouldn't be prepared and well-researched; but instead, that in order for the oral history to be truly collaborative, the interviewer must be reasonably knowledgeable about the history and have thoughtful curiosities about their interviewee's history. (We'll learn more about how to prepare later.)

WHY ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is often used as a means of knowledge production, memory preservation, and the telling of marginalized stories in the form of recorded and transcribed interviews. It is important to remember that Black and Indigenous practices of oral history—the passing of knowledge intergenerationally through relationships and spoken word, particularly as a way of building and sustaining resistance lineages—precede the academic method, process, and product of "oral history;" the latter of which has arisen as an institutionalization of the former. This project draws from both practices of oral history while centering knowledge *transfer* above all else: moving organizing knowledge from one generation to the next, from one movement to another.

Oral history makes for an especially durable and capacious method of knowledge transfer. Simple transcripts and audio files can hold the moment's global, local, and institutional context; nuanced explanations of the constraints and opportunities organizers faced; and details of decision-making, internal structure, and conflict resolution. Though each oral history relies on a single person's memory, which can be faulty and skewed—when taken collectively, they are a powerful method of sharing knowledge of institutional power and how to work within, around, and against it.

Columbia Prison Divest (CPD) was the first movement the project collected oral histories on. CPD successfully fought for Columbia's divestment from two major private prison corporations: G4S and Corrections Corporation of America (now CoreCivic).

This zine arises from the project team's work on that first project and ongoing oral history collection project. The zine's goal is to distribute, rather than hoard, the lessons we learned on how to collect student organizing oral histories for everyone interested in making, distributing, and

utilizing knowledge outside of institutions. Throughout the zine, I refer back to this project as an example for thinking through and preparing for your oral history.

What makes an oral history
of ORGANIZING
different than any
other oral history?

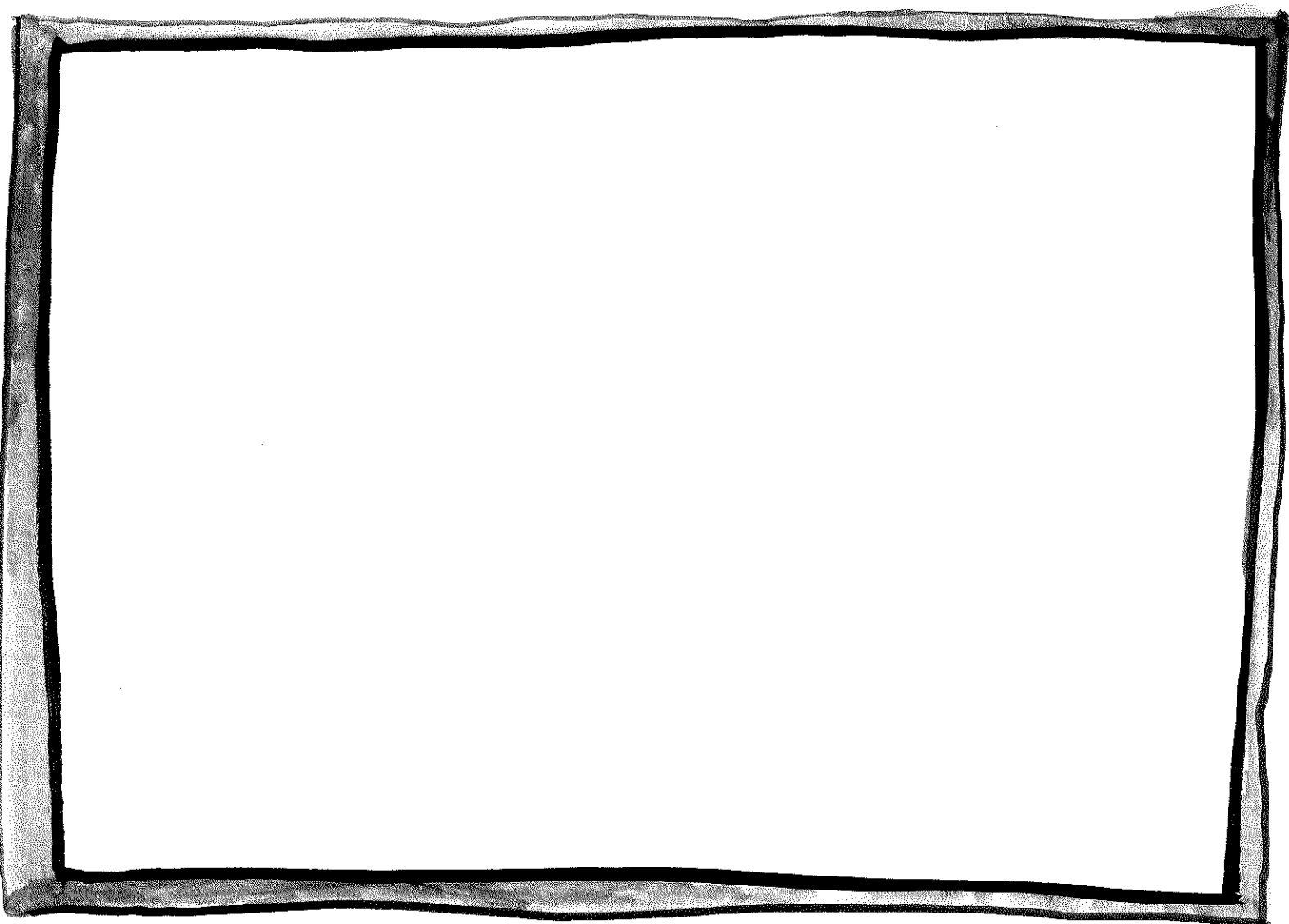
When we're doing an oral history for and about organizing, we should be primarily focused on **knowledge transfer** rather than memory preservation or making marginalized voices "visible" (though these can be intersecting purposes). Oral history projects whose purpose is primarily preservation or storytelling are no doubt important projects, but they do not center the same questions that we want to. We want to think about **what are our gaps in knowledge right now, what information might a past movement hold, and how we can ask reflexive questions about that past movement.**

Also, this is not for the purposes of institutional knowledge production; this is for anti-institutional knowledge production—that which helps clarify and foster action against harmful institutional power.

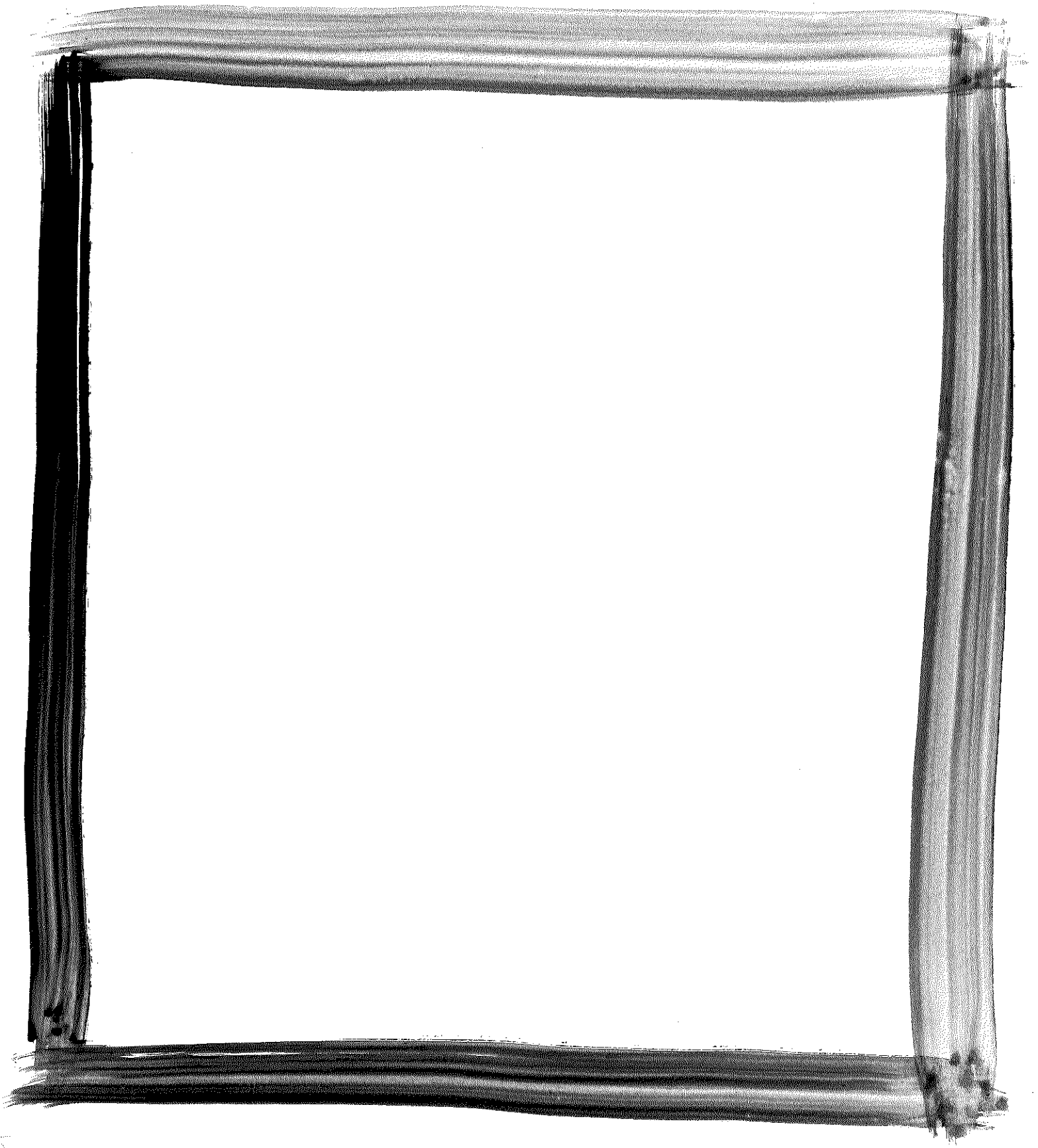
WHERE TO START:

picking a
MOVEMENT

make a list of what kinds of topics,
strategies, tactics, time periods, kinds of
institutional repression and responses to them
you're interested in exploring:



WHAT ORGANIZING QUESTIONS
DO YOU HAVE?



What historical movements or moments in student organizing at your school do you think have answers to these questions?

There are big moments in history that we probably all know about (anti-war protests of the 60s/70s, anti-apartheid divestment movement,) but organizing is happening all around us and throughout time, even if it doesn't make the headlines or the history books. You might have to do some pre-pre-research to find the movement, group, or campaign that would be most useful for you.

Where and how can you do this research?

student newspaper archives
(digital or paper)

Institutional archives

In institutional archives, and to a lesser extent student newspapers/journalism, be thoughtful about your engagement. Can you read between the lines of archival knowledge and ask questions about the invisible organizing work that might have led to a big, flashy moment?

Ask faculty, staff, and community members about what student organizing they remember that might intersect with your interests.

HOW DID THIS MOVEMENT CHALLENGE INSTITUTIONAL POWER?

Consider that universities are not isolated kingdoms unto themselves—but, instead, a part of larger systems of domination, control, and extraction locally, regionally, and globally. Think about what resources your university controls and how they control them. Think about who is in and around the university (think beyond just students + faculty to staff + the neighborhood), and how they are affected by that resource control. How did the movement you're studying think about the university's relationship to the rest of the community/world? How did they challenge what/who the university controls and/or how they control it?

For example: Columbia Prison Divest knew that Columbia University supported the prison industrial complex by participating in NYPD raids against Black communities in the neighborhood and investing a part of its massive wealth in private prison companies. They chose to target the latter by demanding that Columbia divest from private prison companies.

Note: This might be a question that you don't have many answers to before doing your oral histories. Use this to sketch out some questions, and keep the larger question: how did they challenge power in mind as you continue.

Within that movement/organizing, what are the strategies and tactics they employed that you want to learn more about?

Difference between goals, strategies, and tactics:

CPD's goal was the abolition of prisons in the United States. Their strategy was to get Columbia University to divest from private prison companies, removing money and institutional credibility from the prison industrial complex and inspiring others to wage similar institutional divestment campaigns. Their tactics included broad political education (teaching the university community about prison abolition), pursuing the "official" channels of divestment inside the institution, and holding direct actions to pressure the administration when official processes stalled.

What is the "HOUSEWORK" you want to know about?

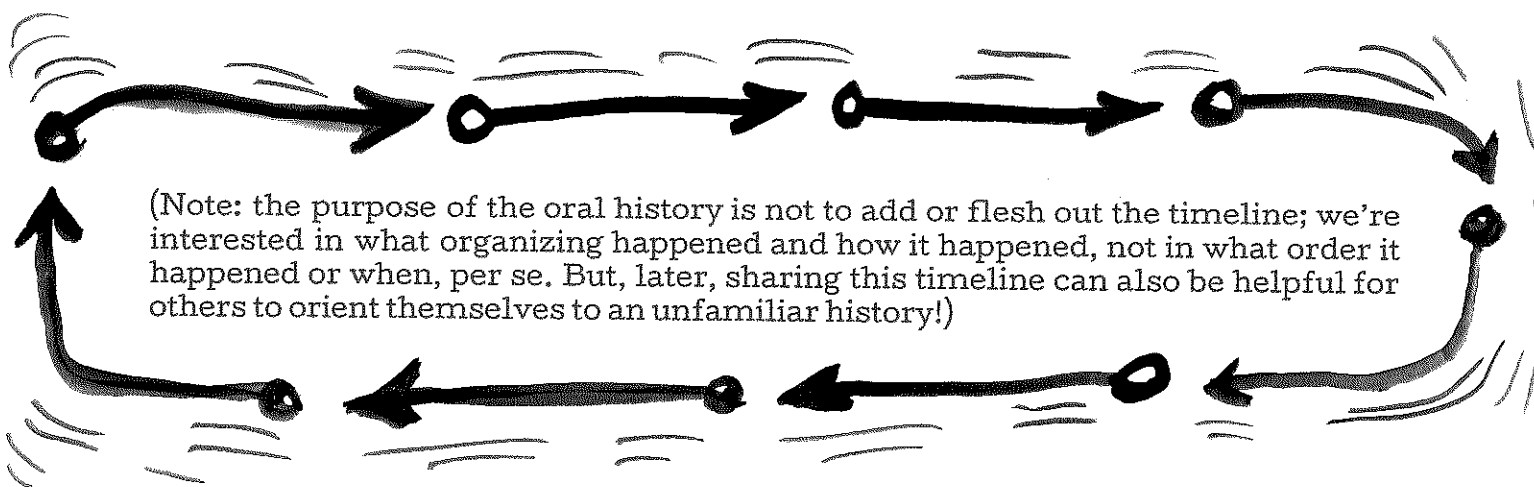
What is the "HOUSEWORK" of organizing?
Why is it important?

Think of this as the **building and maintenance of internal structures/processes** (emotional, social, and logistical). This looks like resolving conflict within the group, fostering relationships between group members, helping group members who are mentally/emotionally struggling, being a "vibe-checker" or emotional support, finding meeting space, feeding people, cleaning up after a meeting, following up on tasks, taking meeting notes, etc. This is critical labor—absolutely essential for the maintenance of movements—that is often unacknowledged as such; it often falls on women, queer and trans people, and people of color—women and queer and trans people of color especially.

The term "housework" in relation to organizing comes from Adrienne Williams and Balrag Gill. Read more about it in Williams' August 9, 2024 interview with Mary Jirmanus Saba in Convergence Magazine.

PRE-INTERVIEW RESEARCH:

Make a timeline—mostly for yourself. For those of us who consider ourselves anti-imperialists, linear time is a tricky concept (find another zine about the western, imperial construction of time :)), but making a brief linear timeline can help orient yourself to a history you are otherwise unfamiliar with.



(Note: the purpose of the oral history is not to add or flesh out the timeline; we're interested in what organizing happened and how it happened, not in what order it happened or when, per se. But, later, sharing this timeline can also be helpful for others to orient themselves to an unfamiliar history!)

SOURCES TO CONSIDER:

STUDENT
NEWSPAPER
ARCHIVE

SOCIAL
MEDIA
DIGGING

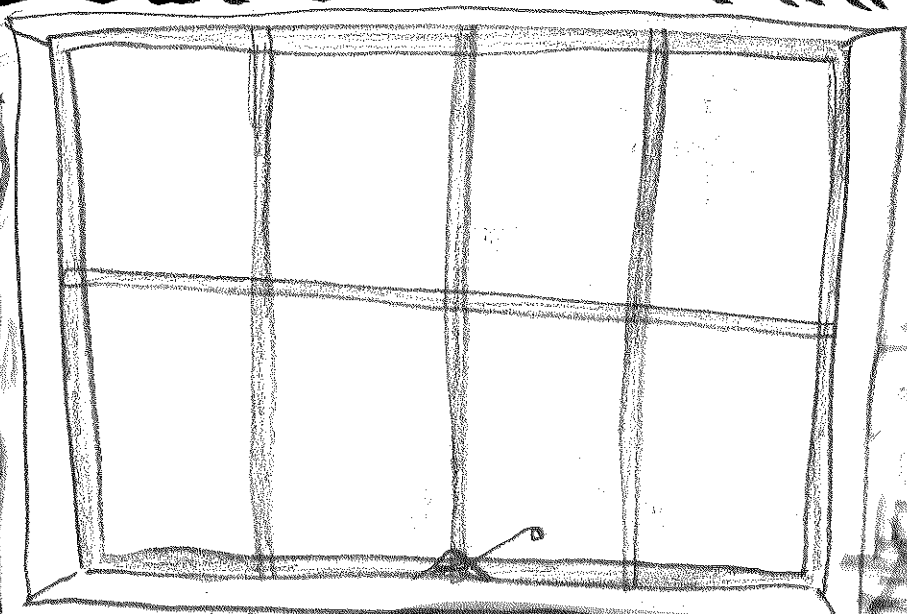
INFO
FROM STUDENTS,
STAFF, &
FACULTY

When and how did the group start, roughly? What were major actions? Any wins? Any losses? Any major campus, local, national, or transnational events that inform the organizing? Help yourself see the political context the organizing was responding to; what the organizing produced; and its effects.

FINDING YOUR narrators

Now, you need to find your narrators.

In the course of your research online + in the archives, you probably came across some names of organizers who publicly associated themselves with your movement/group. Do some thorough research of potential contact points. Maybe the group they organized with is still around, and maybe they have contact with that person. Finding & reaching your narrators may take some time, so be prepared!



PROTECTING OUR NARRATORS & OTHERS: SECURITY / VISIBILITY

When you're thinking about how/what to share and store, you must balance security and visibility. You want the lessons and information from the oral history to be shared with those who it would be useful for, but you don't want to put your narrators at risk. Consult this graphic for some questions to think about and options for sharing/storing your oral history.

MOST VISIBLE / LEAST SECURE

publishing it publicly

Sharing on social media

Having share-out events with people to share the oral history

Distributing copies to trusted people

Full names, identifying details in transcript and audio file

MIDDLE VISIBLE / SECURE

Storing on a cloud storage or file hosting service (Google Drive, iCloud, Dropbox, etc), encrypted services (Proton Drive)

Anonymization of names & identifying details

Who has access? personal, non-institutional account

institutional account

LEAST VISIBLE / MOST SECURE

IF sharing widely, only share lessons from the oral history, rather than any details.

Storing the transcript as a paper copy & nowhere else

storing the transcript/audio on an external hard drive + nowhere else

How vulnerable are your narrators or those they organized with, and in what ways are they vulnerable?

(Immigration status, job/financial security, doxxing, risk of state criminalization and/or institutional punishment)

Are there any identifying details about others in the oral history?

Do your narrators discuss legally-risky matters?

Are these strategies and tactics that the institution shouldn't know about / have a hold of?

Who should know about this history? (People at other institutions/a general audience; people at your institution; a specific subset of people at your institution; just your organizing group or coalition)

Is this work that is already publicly known?

How recent was the organizing?

INTERVIEWING TIPS and TRICKS

LOOK AT EXAMPLES:

The ACT Up Oral History Project contains well over a hundred oral histories from ACT UP organizers. (actuporalhistory.org)

The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project contains dozens of oral narratives on resistance to urban displacement. (antievictionmap.com/narratives)

Designing questions beforehand?

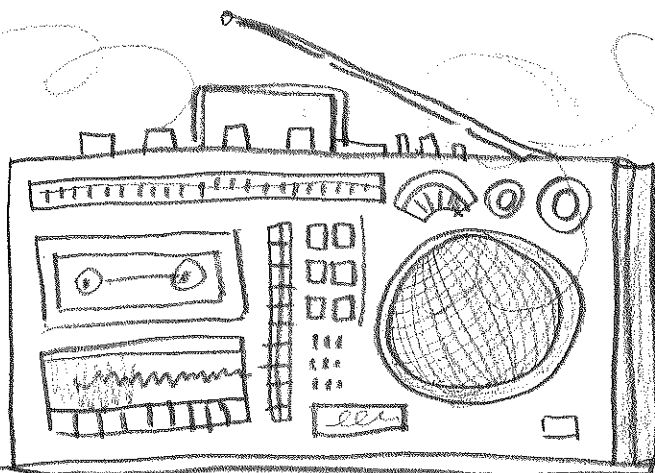
Key to oral history is asking simple, broad questions that elucidate your narrator's memory and interests before asking narrower and narrower questions that drill down on the gritty how-to that you're looking for.

i.e. "When you began your group, what were your organizing goals?" -> "Why or how did you identify those demands?" -> "How did the group arrive at a consensus?"

But! Don't write these out beforehand, per se. Have a list of topics or themes that you're interested in exploring rather than a script that you have to follow.

DURING THE INTERVIEW:

Be present! Listen to what the person you're talking to is interested in and knows about and respond with what you think is interesting about what they said.



HOW TO TRANSCRIBE

1. Listen to the audio and, on the first pass, write out everything that is said (Note: this will take at least 3x as long as the audio file is, so make time.)

2. Cut out filler words that don't add meaning (umm, likes, you know, etc), repeated words, false starts (when someone starts to say something but then abandons that sentence and says something else), and misspeaks that were later corrected.

The goal is to make the transcript as easy to read as possible without changing or cutting out the original meaning; and because we absorb written language differently than spoken language, the exact things people say need to be slightly adjusted when transcribed to maintain meaning and legibility.

(Note: Transcription is best done a day or two after the interview. When the conversation is fresh in your mind you will have an easier time remembering the intended meaning of a phrase or sentence.)

3. If you can, have a friend listen to the audio and proof the transcript for mistakes you may have missed.

4. Send your transcript back to your interviewee for edits. Allow your interviewee to edit any part of the transcript in any way, including removing parts of the transcript or rewriting it even. This is a part of the collaborative process of oral history, and allows for the interviewee to correct things they said and have control of what information about them is accessible to others. (Note: this is an important part of the ethical and security practices of oral history.)

What do you do with your interview?

DO MORE!

The collective knowledge of oral histories is only strengthened in numbers. Ask your interviewee at the end of your oral history if there is anyone else that they think you should speak to (even better, ask if they can facilitate an introduction). At the end of the oral history process, you'll likely have even more questions that different people will be able to answer. Think about those questions and who you might talk to about them.

SHARE & STRATEGIZE WITH FELLOW STUDENT ORGANIZERS

Think about your current campus organizing climate. Who is doing work that this might be useful for? Can you come together with fellow organizers within your group (and outside your group) to talk about the strategies, tactics, and other information contained in the oral history and how you can use that for your organizing?

REMEMBER PRINCIPLES OF CONSENT, PRIVACY, AND SECURITY WHEN SHARING

i.e. Always be in contact and consultation with your interviewee when you're deciding where and how the oral history should be stored.

Think about where to store this (think about digital security!)

Refer back to the "Protecting Our Narrators and Others" graphic on page II.

The most stable and secure way is a paper copy stored in multiple locations.

WHO SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO IT?

Is this just for you? (It shouldn't be!) Is this for your group? (Does your group have a hard drive that you keep important stuff on?) Is this for a broader section of the campus body? (Can you invite people to read it and talk it through with you?) Is it for everyone? (Is it safe to publish it widely and/or should you publish key lessons without publishing the full transcript?)

WRITE OUT SOME WAYS TO SHARE
AND STRATEGIZE WITH OTHERS:

WRITE OUT SOME WAYS & PLACES
YOU CAN STORE YOUR ORAL HISTORY: