

Written in 2018, revised in 2021
Do not reproduce without permission

“Fuck You, Pay Me”: An Argument for Payment in Oral History
By Danielle Dulken, Ph.D. Candidate

Part I. Admitting Transaction, Seeking Transformation

In the context of our roundtable on ethical listening, my remarks attend to the pre-interview. Or, how we might enter into ethical relations that recognize power, material realities, and mutual and divergent interests within neoliberal structures and under a regime of racial capitalism—before we ever press play.

Here, I want to raise the issue of payment. Or how we become responsible to our narrator’s time and storytelling labor. I suggest we negotiate payment with narrators early in our collaborative process.

In the context of institutional oral history, practitioners largely reject compensation based on an imagined narrative that payment corrupts the co-creation of interviews. What evidence do we have for this? And who benefits from this position? Then there’s the argument that payment conditions narrators to tell rehearsed stories. How dare we assume what’s owed to us and ignore the very real possibility that narrators tell us what we’re allowed to know. It’s quite perplexing that the field adamant about its distance from licensed counseling simultaneously craves access to human beings’ fraught interiority. Worse yet, is the argument that one cannot price a story’s value. This statement misrepresents the relationship between interviewer and narrator as non-transactional when in fact it is always already a complex constellation of desire, performance, and refusal. Stories exchanged for archival services *is* a transactional operation. Today’s standard oral history practice argues that stories are valued at the worth of a recording, which may be archived or simply returned to the narrator.

Yet on the margins, some of us center payment as a constitutive element of our praxis. This recognition of labor and time, a material reality in our capitalist world system, rejects assumptions about oral histories inherent provisions. Payment recognizes our shared existence in this era of neoliberalism whereas a recording may not. This is of course, subject to your collaborative process, but I argue that conversations on payment with narrators is instrumental to the relationships we build in this world.

Part II. Training

From the beginning of our training, we're told that payment poisons the process. Instead, oral history is service-based; we reciprocate with the archive. In some cases, we might also provide tertiary components to movement building, but I hesitate to join the rampant naturalization of oral history as activism.

For the sake of our time together, I want to stake out payment as an important topic in our training. One that we should address, not deny, through discussions on power, material realities, social reciprocation, and our responsibilities to each other.

Our training must also address the oral historian's financial precarity in and beyond the context of payment. We're situated in resource scarce corners of non-profits, academia, and other institutions. More challenging yet is the work of self-funded oral historians. While our own financial precarity may preclude payment, we should endeavor to dialogue with narrators about compensation so as to name, not ignore, survival in vampiric world systems. Furthermore, we can commit to listing payment as a critical expense in our grant writing. My understanding is that grantors look on this practice favorably. Indeed, this was true in my own work and how I funded narrators through a mutually set hourly rate for their time and labor. Rather than turn away from payment, we should look to the rich traditions of compensation in neighboring fields, like anthropology, and arrive at our assessment through knowledge not ignorance.

As I sit here today, I'm met with the stares of people, predominately white like me, who have and will design projects on, with, or for people who are minoritized within the structures of white supremacy. I can't help but wonder about the intentions and limitations of our work. Who does oral history, by design, *truly* serve? And I will ask again, how is a release form and commitment to preservation exchanged for a personal testimonial not already transactional?

Some may disregard my calls for payment, citing a field forged through radical imaginings. They may scoff, is this work not already justice? Despite scholarship claiming so, myself and others continue finding ourselves up against questions of exploitation and gatekeeping. Perhaps radical imaginings from the early 20th century must be re-imagined! Or, perhaps what I'm proposing isn't oral history at all and that's the problem.

Part III. Fund Abortions, Build Power

Interestingly, I arrived at payment during the annual meeting for the National Network of Abortion Funds (NNAF). Run by committed DIY organizers across the United States and Mexico, NNAF members creatively identify every possible funding source to ensure callers can access health care.

When I attended in 2017, abortion storytelling was being featured in publications like *New York Magazine* and *The Chicago Tribune*. A few years earlier, I told my own abortion story in my local independent paper, *The Mountain Xpress*. This phenomenon intended to normalize abortion care and move beyond the privilege rhetoric of "choice."

A group called We Testify, a collective of people who share abortion stories to build solidarity, had been repeatedly approached by national outlets and print and reproduce their testimonials. As I sat in a room filled with hundreds of people, I witnessed a conversation unfold about the power dynamics of storytelling—who tells them and who uses them.

On instance in particular converted me on the question of payment. A Black person belonging to We Testify emerged from the crowd and yelled, “They need to pay us for our stories. They clearly have value! Our stories are ours! Our stories are our labor. Pay us for our labor!”

We Testify’s collective named oral history’s taboo in absolute terms—power versus labor. Not unlike the narrators we seek to record, members of We Testify managed financial insecurity while sharing intimate stories to reshape and challenge dominant narratives. Sitting there, an abortion fundraiser *and* an oral historian, I found myself forced to reconcile an ethical conflict.

Part IV. “Fuck You, Pay Me”

We Testify transformed the abstracted labor of storytelling I learned in my oral history training into the material. Once I heard it, I couldn’t unlearn it. Again, and again, I encountered this argument in union organizing, in activist movements, in the classroom, and more. It seems obvious now, because of course people should be paid for their time and labor.

@browngirlcurator is the Instagram account of Jasmine Wahi. Wahi is a first generation South Asian-American curator, professor, writer, and cultural producer. She also co-leads Project Empty Space, an artist complex in Newark that centers queer people of color. On Instagram, she recently posted images of herself in a jacket adorned with the inscription: Fuck You, Pay Me. In a later post, she sold shirts to fundraise for People of Color whose labors were ignored and stolen. On the shirts, she’d emblazoned: *Fuck You, Pay Me: End the perpetuation of systemic race/ gender/ sex/ ability/ class – based economic oppression.*

Part V. Reproductive justice in Appalachia

For my oral history project on reproductive justice in Southern Appalachia, I work with migrant Latinx farmworkers in Western North Carolina. I work with Black women in subsidized housing. I work with

tribal members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. I work with white women who don't have health insurance.

The logics of reproductive justice—an organizing framework by Loretta Ross that follows a human rights approach, to argue for the right to have children, not have children, and raise children in safe, healthy environments—pushed me yet again to reexamine my praxis. I soon understood that a project about care, required care.

Returning to oral history's basics, I started talking to people. One of the most significant conversations was with a professor who's an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. I raised my inclination—to divest from oral history's anti-payment position and fund the labor of narrators. His response? “Yeah, you better pay people for their labor.”

He generously shared more about his own work and described a new project on Tsalagi language revitalization with Eastern Band tribal members. On grant applications, he explained why participants must be paid for their labor. So far, all the granters made that possible.

Unspoken but present in our meeting was a reality we both knew: the historic and ongoing theft of Indigenous culture. Storytelling has been part of Native cosmology for more than ten-thousand years. It was my responsibility to reject this tradition.

So, I applied for grants. Based on my re-orientations to power and labor, I followed the professor's application practice and listed payment as a key project expense. I was awarded four competitive grants and returned home to Western North Carolina to build relationships.

As I begin meeting people, I shared my background. I was a person from Appalachia deeply invested in its social geographies and struggles. We identified predatory journalism practices in the region, which leech stories from people, misrepresent them, and return to do it again for the

next Appalachian spectacle. Furthermore, we explicitly named how Black people, Indigenous people, and immigrants in Appalachia were particularly susceptible to this abuse. In response, I offered to pay them.

My offer was met with relief. I heard, “You get it!” and “Thank you for being so thoughtful about this history.” This revelation revolutionized my oral history practice. From that point on, providing an hourly rate, paying for meals, and covering childcare and transportation costs, established narrator relationships that foregrounded the oft unspoken dynamics of power and labor. We could exist in the shared awareness of our desires without diminishing the consequences of our needs. Divorcing myself from oral history’s fantastical attachments to innate benevolence—as well as its discursive neoliberalism dressed up as “justice”—brought me closer to the people whose stories I would steward.

Part VI. Toward Transformation

Desiree Adaway is a Black educator living in Western North Carolina. She owns and operates The Adaway Group, a racial justice consultancy that teaches resilient, equitable, and inclusive institutional practices. On working with communities of color, she Tweeted “Build transformational relationships, not transactional ones.” I believe oral history’s reconsideration of payment and a reevaluation of our roles in the 21st century could lead us toward that goal.