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**To cite this article:** Fanny Julissa García & Nara Milanich (2023) Money Talks: Narrator Compensation in Oral History, *The Oral History Review*, 50:2, 148-168, DOI: [10.1080/00940798.2023.2230243](https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2023.2230243)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2023.2230243>



Published online: 19 Jul 2023.



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## Money Talks: Narrator Compensation in Oral History

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### ABSTRACT

There is little public discussion about the compensation of narrators in oral history and no guidelines regarding the practice. This article seeks to open up a conversation about this issue. Drawing on our experience developing an oral history project with Central American migrant families, we discuss why we came to believe that paying project participants was appropriate and necessary. We review arguments for and against compensation and make a case for *situated compensation*: the idea that decisions about whether, how, and how much to pay narrators are project-specific and must take into consideration a series of factors, including the profile of the narrators, the nature of the interviews, the context of the project, and its goals or deliverables. We describe lessons learned from our experience and identify considerations that project designers should take into account as they assess decisions about narrator compensation. Conversations about payment should engage not only project designers but also funders, administrators, and narrators themselves.

### KEYWORDS

Migration; narrator compensation; oral history ethics; payment; project design

Ms. Pérez was speaking animatedly over Skype. She was on a cell phone in a small village in the Guatemalan highlands, and while the line occasionally dipped and crackled, her voice remained strong. She was adamant that she wanted to share “what I have suffered, what I’ve lived”—so adamant, in fact, that she mentioned that she had left her home in another region at 2 a.m. that morning and traveled six hours on the bus to her current location, in order to have cell service to take our call.<sup>1</sup>

For two and a half hours, Ms. Pérez talked. She talked about her work selling fruit (“They tell me I’m a really good saleswoman”) and about her two younger children (whose education had abruptly ended when COVID shuttered schools and they could not access online instruction). She talked about the coffee harvests and her faith in God. She talked about the impossibility of making a living in rural Guatemala and the grim necessity of migration. And she narrated the day in 2017 when she and her oldest son, Julio, then fourteen, arrived at the US-Mexico border, the day the Border Patrol took her quiet, baby-faced boy away without letting her say goodbye, before holding her in detention for months and eventually ordering her onto a plane, her hands and feet shackled, and deporting her back to Guatemala without him. Finally, she talked about how the failed migration had left the family in more precarious circumstances than ever, with an onerous debt they had no way to pay.

Our conversation with Ms. Pérez is one of more than thirty we have conducted with Central American migrant families as part of *Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity*. This oral history project documents the Trump administration’s infamous “zero-tolerance” policy of 2017–18, in which border authorities forcibly separated unprecedented numbers of migrant parents and children arriving at the US-Mexico border. The interviews are long, deep, complex, and, for narrators, often time consuming, logistically laborious, and, of

course, emotionally wrenching. They document a historic human rights violation that will be remembered, debated, researched, commemorated, and litigated far into the future. These families are the protagonists of that history, and any reckoning with it must begin with their stories.

Open-ended oral histories with the parents and children who lived this catastrophe provide insights and observations as no other source can, not even the extensive journalistic coverage of family separation. Over many hours of crackling phone lines, narrators have contributed their testimony to help us make sense of what they experienced. They have done so not only with future posterity in mind but also in the hopes of assisting immigrant rights activism, policy work, and litigation in the present. As one mother stated, “I would be willing to tell my story a thousand times over because I don’t want this to happen again, especially with my people, people from other countries. We are human beings.”<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, it was clear that this project would involve unusual logistical, ethical, and legal complexity. We spent more than a year discussing the project design before talking to anyone. But as soon as we began the interviews, an issue arose in conversations with each other that we had not previously considered: given the time and energy narrators invested in the project, given their dire economic circumstances, and given the unique value of their testimony, we wondered, should we not compensate them for their participation?

Our gut response was a resounding yes. But what could—and should—compensation look like in practice? *How* should we pay people, many of whom lived in remote rural areas of Central America and had no bank account? *How much* should we pay them? And perhaps most importantly, given that we needed to go back to make the case for compensation to our funders, *why*, precisely, should we pay them—other than simply because it felt right? Were there best practices we could draw on to answer these questions? Were there resources we could consult to marshal our case? Were there arguments *against* payment that we should consider?

We began to look around for guidance and found two provocative calls in favor of payment, both from freelance cultural workers—perhaps not coincidentally, practitioners especially attuned to the economic asymmetries that characterize academic and cultural labor. Danielle Dulken has spoken about how her compensation practice in Appalachia-based work grew out of a desire to refuse the “predatory” practices that so often characterize outsiders’ approach to stories from the region. Oral historian Jess Lamar Reece Holler has framed narrator compensation within the wider context of *equity budgeting*, which she defines as “the basic, radical commitment to pay everybody”—freelancers, students, community members, and narrators alike. She calls on practitioners to compensate “the people who are ‘documented’ in the same way that you are compensating the people doing the documenting.”<sup>3</sup> There were also some voices opposing payment. On H-Oral Hist, an online listserv for the field, in 2015, someone posted a question about narrator compensation; in the brief thread that followed, several participants characterized the practice as “odd,” “illogical,” or “wrong.”<sup>4</sup> The thread reflected one of the field’s traditional conceptions, that stories are objects that the narrator freely donates by way of the aptly named “deed of gift.”<sup>5</sup>

These voices were a helpful start. Beyond them, we found no systematic guidelines on narrator compensation and no resources to help us craft a case to funders. There was not only a lack of consensus about the practice, but also no consistent language to discuss it. What prevailed was, by and large, silence. In a conversation we had about the issue, oral historian Erin Vong gave words to this perception: she noted that compensation is part of

oral historians' "whisper network"—which is to say, that it is sometimes practiced but is rarely discussed, at least publicly.<sup>6</sup>

This article is a response to that silence. We seek to rescue the question of narrator compensation from the whisper network and to help advance a frank conversation about it. We draw, in the first instance, on our experiences with *Separated*. In an effort to organize and deepen our thoughts on the issue, we also reached out to more than a half-dozen experienced oral historians to discuss whether and how they or their organizations compensate narrators. Finally, we dipped into ethical literatures on journalism and human subjects research, in order to understand better how adjacent fields with more open discussions of payment and nonpayment frame these issues.

Through this work, we have come to believe that compensation is like consent—something all practitioners must address as they design an oral history project. But the question of whether, how, and how much to pay is project-specific. Following language suggested to us by Mariana Katz, our graduate project coordinator, we call this *situated compensation*. By this we mean that decisions about payment must take into account the profile of the narrators, the context of the project, and the project's intended outcomes. In the case of our own project, we believe that narrator compensation is an ethical imperative. In what follows, we discuss why we came to this conclusion and the protocols we developed in order to pay participants. We share language, arguments, and framing that we developed in the course of the project, which we honed in dialogue with ethical literatures and in conversations with colleagues. We discuss some of the ethical and logistical dilemmas we faced in paying narrators located in four different countries. Finally, we identify a set of considerations that may help project designers evaluate the place of payment in their own work. We do not argue for universal narrator compensation but rather for situated compensation—the idea that project designers must consider the issue and that narrators should be compensated in some projects. We offer concepts and arguments with which to talk about the issue with funders, boards, administrators, the public, and narrators themselves.

Whether or not to pay narrators is, of course, in part a practical and budgetary matter. But it is much more than that. Exchanging money in the context of oral history lays bare thorny questions about power, value, consent, ownership, and who benefits from storytelling. In other words, the question of compensation goes to the heart of political and ethical dilemmas with which the field of oral history has long grappled.

The issue has become more urgent in recent years as practitioners have deepened long-standing conversations about power and privilege in oral history practice. Oral history has of course long trained its attention on the marginalized and the unheard. This has been the case at least since the late 1920s and 1930s, when Zora Neale Hurston interviewed one of the last survivors of the Middle Passage and the Federal Writer's Project gathered thousands of first-person accounts of formerly enslaved people. In the sixties and seventies, Studs Terkel's interviews with the "common man" popularized the genre. Some of oral history's foundational thinkers have written with power and eloquence about the relationship between interviewers and narrators (Alessandro Portelli comes to mind). Some of its noisiest controversies have dealt with the issue of who benefits from storytelling (witness the conflict between Rigoberta Menchú and anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos, to whom Menchú told her story). Adjacent fields have grappled with similar issues: Lee Ann Fujii's work on relational interviewing in social science research is one example.<sup>7</sup> More recently, new ways of thinking about research practices and project design—decolonial methods,

community-based and participatory action research, equity budgeting—have deepened and expanded conversations about the ethics, and economics, of oral history work.

Of course, paying narrators requires having money to do so. Any discussion of this issue must engage not only those who carry out academic and cultural activities but also those who fund them. From this perspective, it is an especially propitious moment to expand a conversation about narrator payment, as the foundations that support this kind of work have in recent years re-oriented their funding priorities around principles of community engagement and social justice. We hope that funders, too, will join this conversation.

“Payment” as we are discussing it here goes beyond reimbursing narrators for transportation, childcare, or other expenses they incur as a result of their participation in an oral history project. It also goes beyond the token gifts that interviewers sometimes give interviewees in symbolic gratitude. Instead, we understand compensation to mean just that: not something charitably *given* by the interviewer but something *earned* by the interviewee—payment for a narrator’s time, effort, emotional labor; for the value of their experience, expertise, positionality or world view; for their contributions to a project that has value in the wider world; or perhaps even for their story itself. Indeed, one thorny question raised by paying narrators is what, specifically, is the payment *for*.

## The Project

In 2019, oral historian Fanny García and Latin American history professor Nara Milanich accompanied a class of Barnard-Columbia undergraduates to serve as interpreters for a pro-bono legal services project at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, Texas. Despite its innocuous name, this “family residential center” was a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility—the largest in the country, in fact, and one specifically tasked with jailing migrant mothers and children. It was almost a year after the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance policy, and in our conversations with them, the lawyers in Dilley had an idea. The previous summer, they had become close to dozens of separated mothers who had been jailed in the facility, and they felt these women’s experiences had been inadequately covered in the media. Why not develop an oral history project focused on the experiences of these families? For reasons both personal and political, we found this idea compelling. We began to explore what a project might look like but, given the obvious practical, legal, and ethical issues such a project would obviously entail, we agreed to move slowly.

Then, over the pandemic summer of 2020, the advocacy organization Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) hired García to lead a storytelling project. The project’s aim, according to the WRC, was to amplify the voices of migrating people at a moment of intense fear, to educate the US public about those arriving at the US-Mexico border, to shape media representations, and to help build support among policymakers and the public for more just border policies. The project was framed as a challenge both to the Department of Homeland Security’s attempts to limit migrants’ contact with the press and to the broader climate of fear and intimidation that caused many people to remain silent. The precise “deliverables” of the project remained undefined, although its designers believed that storytelling could shape media narratives and help build support among policymakers and the public for less violent, less punitive border policies.

In its original conception, the plan was for interviews to take place in person at the US-Mexico border. The pandemic put a swift end to that plan. However, advocacy groups had contact information for migrants who could presumably be contacted by cell phone. It was not ideal, but the alternative was to suspend the project altogether. Given the urgency of the issues at stake, WRC decided to move ahead with the project, and García began to develop an all-remote project design.

Remote interviews changed the scope of the project. Rather than focusing on individuals who had been stalled at the US-Mexico border and who would thus have been the main subjects of a face-to-face project, the project shifted to a group whose stories and experiences are arguably even less known: those who were deported back to their home countries. As it turned out, most of these deportees were parents who, upon arriving at the border, had been forcibly separated from their children by US authorities as part of the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy. At that moment, WRC's storytelling project and the oral history project we had been exploring fortuitously merged. We identified three project goals: first, to create an archive of oral histories of a historical moment that we believed would long be remembered and studied; second, to serve policy initiatives, legal efforts, and communications work in the present; and third, to provide families with an open-ended opportunity to speak in their own voice about what they had experienced.

The project team soon expanded. We began working with Justice in Motion, another advocacy organization that, together with WRC and several others, has worked to find "lost" parents who had been separated and deported and whom the US government, which had failed to keep consistent records, were unable to find. We coordinated closely with Justice in Motion's *defensores*—Central America-based human rights workers tasked with tracking down these parents. The *defensores*, who developed close relationships with the parents they found, became invaluable advisors and identified prospective narrators. Then, in the spring of 2021, students joined the team. Fourteen undergraduates enrolled in Milanich's Barnard College class on the history and politics of Central American migration and asylum received training in trauma-informed interviewing, transcription, thematic indexing, and other aspects of oral history practice and spent hundreds of hours working on interview transcriptions. Since then, two additional cohorts of students—more than forty in total—have participated in the project.

All of these individuals, it is worth noting, received some form of remuneration for their participation. Some of us were paid salaries as part of our jobs. García was hired by WRC as a consultant and was also compensated for her work with students. Students garnered course credit, and those who continued working on the project in the summer received stipends, thanks to a grant from the Mellon Foundation to support community-engaged teaching at Barnard. The grant also paid for a graduate project coordinator. There was one group, however, who did not initially stand to receive compensation for their participation: the narrators themselves.

Given how central narrator compensation has become to the project's design as well as to its budget, the oversight now appears glaring. Originally it was simply not on our radar. As the interviews got under way, however, the question of narrator compensation rose quickly to the front of our agenda.

We began with little information about the people referred to the project, other than the fact they had attempted to migrate to the US and that they had experienced brutal separations from their children at the hands of US border authorities. A portrait of these



families soon emerged. About two-thirds of the narrators were Guatemalan and the remaining third were Honduran and Salvadoran. The majority of parents had been deported while their children remained in the US. In several instances, though, parents had been able to remain in, or had subsequently returned to, the US.<sup>8</sup> One key theme that recurred in the interviews was narrators' dire economic straits as both a cause and consequence of migration. Most of those we spoke with lived in rural Guatemala, where a ten-hour day in the fields earns a male laborer 50 *quetzales*, or about \$6.50, but where it is typically impossible to find more than a few days of work per week. Narrators talked about the lack of employment and the constant challenge of feeding their families. They spoke of eking out a living on small plots of land that had gone dry due to climate change. They described making the decision to migrate in order to pay for uniforms and supplies for children to continue their schooling or for medicines for an ailing spouse. The phrase several narrators used was *salir adelante*—to move forward, to progress. Migrating to the US and sending money home was the only way to *salir adelante*, to meet basic needs or envision a different future for their children.

It was no coincidence that the majority of our Guatemalan narrators were Indigenous. In recent years at least half of the Guatemalans apprehended at the US border have been Indigenous.<sup>9</sup> Mayan peoples constitute some forty percent of Guatemala's population. Identified by dress, language, place of residence, and other characteristics, Indigenous Guatemalans have historically experienced discrimination and dispossession and were vastly overrepresented among the over 200,000 people killed in the armed conflict that ended in the 1990s—a conflict today recognized as an ethnic genocide. Today, rural Indigenous communities experience high rates of poverty, and Indigenous Guatemalans are more likely to live in rural areas impacted by climate change as well as by extractive mining and hydroelectric megaprojects that displace people and generate social conflict. As a result of these historical and structural factors, indigeneity itself is a risk factor for forced displacement—even as border regimes tend to erase Indigenous identity.

In tandem with economic imperatives, some narrators fled their homes due to violence. In many poor and working-class communities in Central America, gangs extort, threaten, and kill. We also interviewed narrators forced to leave because of gender-based and domestic violence. Asylum law supposes a clear distinction between political causes of migration (specifically, persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and such) and economic reasons. But we found that in practice people leave home for multiple reasons and that political and economic causes are often inextricably intertwined, to the point that any proximate economic causes more often than not have deeply political roots.

The decision to migrate was in turn a momentous economic gamble—and a risky one. Punitive policies by both Mexican and US authorities to interdict Central American migrants have done nothing to discourage people from leaving home, but they have increased the cost of the journey. Narrators paid as much as 90,000 *quetzales*—more than \$11,700—to coyotes to reach the US-Mexico border. To finance the trip, they mortgaged homes or borrowed money against what little land they had. But most were never able to enter the US. Apprehended at the border, they were separated from their children, jailed, sometimes for months, and then deported. The failed migration was not only deeply traumatizing, it was economically disastrous. They returned as poor as before, and now deeply in debt, having mortgaged or sold what little property they had to pay for the trip. *La deuda*—the debt—haunted their narrations.

Even as narrators' dire circumstances emerged vividly in the interviews, we became acutely aware of how the interviews themselves could be a burden on their livelihoods. Early on, we interviewed a woman who answered our phone call while standing in her *milpa*, or maize field. Chickens clucked in the background. A dog barked. The woman explained that she was busy tending squash (*ayote*). She was obviously occupied, but she also insisted it was not necessary to call her back. The call lasted forty-five minutes. We imagined her either pausing her labors and standing in the middle of the field talking to us, or attempting to continue working with one hand while holding the cell phone with the other. Her work was not confined to the field: this narrator was a widow with three young children. Whatever she got out of "telling her story" to a stranger in another country, and despite the fact she insisted on continuing the conversation, our phone call had obviously interrupted her work.

At the same time, the interviews turned out to be much longer than we had originally anticipated. They typically lasted one to two hours and sometimes as many as four hours. In several instances, we conducted multiple interviews with the same narrator. Finally, some narrators made remarkable efforts to make themselves available to speak with us—like Ms. Pérez, who made the six-hour trip in order to have access to cell service. Deeply traumatized by horrific experiences at the hands of US border authorities, she wanted to talk while in the company of two *defensores* with whom she had developed a close relationship. For the three to come together one Saturday afternoon required considerable effort for all of them. Given that all the project's other participants were being remunerated in some way, should not the narrators—those participants in the direst of circumstances—be compensated, too? After all, without them, there would be no project in the first place.

### **Towards Historical Redress?**

As the project progressed, it was not just this emerging picture of the narrators and the interviews that convinced us that it was essential to compensate narrators. The wider political context of the project also informed our thinking.

WRC originally conceived the storytelling project during the height of the Trump administration, but as the political situation changed, the project developed other possible outcomes. In February 2021, the Biden administration formed a task force to spearhead the reunification of families still separated as a result of the zero-tolerance policy—among whom were many of our narrators.<sup>10</sup> WRC was among the advocacy organizations working with the task force. In our interviews, narrators shared perspectives and preferences that were clearly relevant to the task force's work.

At the same time, it was hard to ignore just how narrow the mandate of the task force was. It was charged with finding a way to reunify at least some families by creating a temporary legal status allowing some deported parents to reenter the US and providing them with basic services, such as mental health care. In other words, it addressed some of the most obvious *consequences* of state-inflicted violence at the border. But it did not reckon with the *causes* or *context* of that violence: years of dehumanizing political and popular rhetoric against immigrants; a deep-seated, well-documented culture of racism among border authorities; and the Trump administration's xenophobia, white nationalism, and radical disregard for the rule of law.<sup>11</sup>

Yet as many observers have argued, and as we concur, the abuses that occurred at the border—abuses that physicians' groups have characterized as torture—demand a much



deeper reckoning.<sup>12</sup> US border authorities' forcible removal of children from their parents can be analogized to other historical instances of state violence against children and families, such as the removal of Native American, First Nations, and aboriginal children from kin and community in North America and Australia; the kidnapping of the children of political dissidents during the Argentine dirty war; and the incarceration of Japanese-American families in World War II. These and other historical episodes of state violence have catalyzed official processes of redress of widely varying scope and ambition.

Migrating peoples who experienced the violence of US border policies deserve similar redress. But it is not clear when, if ever, they will receive it. The task force will take time to do its work, and many families will never benefit from even its limited provisions (as of this writing, about one thousand children remain separated from their parents).<sup>13</sup> In this political context, our responsibilities to our narrators became more complex and more urgent. We had promised that their stories would be used to press for advocacy at a collective, political level, but as we also carefully explained, participating in the project would not help their own individual case in any way.

As the task force's work dragged on, we realized that, for the foreseeable future, our conversations would likely be the most extensive formal interactions concerning the violence they had suffered that these families would have with people from the US. As such, the interviews did not just record what happened to our narrators, but presented an opportunity to intervene in the history itself by staging a kind of dress rehearsal for repair. Indeed, in an ideal scenario, the project could serve broad political efforts to obtain redress.

Historical truth-and-reconciliation processes often include three essential components: the opportunity for victims to share their testimony; for that testimony to be recognized; a formal apology; and the payment of financial reparations. These efforts engage society as a whole in a process that is public and collective in nature. Oral history cannot serve a truth-and-reconciliation function; an interpersonal exchange is not a public reckoning. But in the absence of such a reckoning, our project could serve as a placeholder—an initial first step towards the formal, public repair that we hope is one day coming. For the time being, the interviews provide an opportunity for migrants to share their testimony. They further offer an opportunity for us, the interviewers, to acknowledge that testimony and even to express an apology for the violence committed against them by government officials acting in our name. In this context, narrator compensation serves the symbolic role that reparations hold in a true process of historical redress.

Ultimately, we could not give these families justice. But we could acknowledge their experiences. Material payment was one part of that acknowledgement, and an expression of the "relations and solidarities" that, as Crystal Mun-hye Baik has written, are produced through oral history practice.<sup>14</sup> We could further promise to share these experiences with the activists, advocates, and lawyers who work to change policies. Ideally, the project thus does not simply rehearse repair but helps move us towards an actual process of historical redress. Indeed, this was precisely the aspiration that many narrators expressed: the possibility that their stories could help change the treatment of migrant peoples in the future.

## How Much?

With all these considerations in mind, we decided to pay \$100 per hour of interview to our narrators. The average payment received was \$200; the largest payment to an individual narrator was \$400.

How did we come up with that pay scale? Certainly, it did not reflect the going rate for peoples' time, which in rural Guatemala is of course valued infinitely less—indeed, hardly valued at all. So why not \$5 per hour? Or why not \$200? We confess it was based as much on gut feeling as dispassionate calculation. It was simultaneously a significant sum and nothing at all. We had no illusions that this payment would somehow compensate for these families' trauma or resolve their material precarity. It would not address the structural conditions that necessitated migration in the first place. It would not bring back their still-separated children. Still, it was a very meaningful amount for people living in rural Guatemala. It was also a sum we believed we could afford in the context of the grant.

Our original budget, of course, had not requested any money for narrator compensation. We went back to our grant administrators to request funding. In the absence of established guidelines to help us, we came up with a series of considerations to justify our pay scale. These factors, which we have subsequently expanded, included:

- The transportation in remote rural areas required to reach internet access;
- The fact narrators are using their own technology to talk to us;
- The fact we are asking them to take time out of precarious lives and grueling work schedules;
- The fact we are discussing emotionally traumatic events;
- The fact that all other participants in the project are remunerated for their work;
- The fact that the narrators are participating in the creation of an archive of political value and historical significance;
- A commitment to “opportunistic redistribution,” given that the project brings together institutions and people in radically different economic positions (including a private US college, a wealthy US foundation, and some of the poorest people in the hemisphere);<sup>15</sup>
- The unfortunate reality that true redress remains elusive, and the only acknowledgement they will see for their suffering for the foreseeable future is this conversation with us—a sympathetic ear; and
- Perhaps most of all, a desire for narrators to understand how much we appreciate their participation in this project and the value we place on their stories and on them as human beings.

Many of these folks were shackled, humiliated, and treated, in their own words, “like animals” by Border Patrol officials. So, one goal of this project is simply to demonstrate to them a different kind of treatment, in order that they understand that many people in the US abhor the violence done to them. Part of how we do that is through material compensation.

This was a kitchen-sink response. Uncertain what would stick, we gave a variety of arguments. We do not know which of these arguments administrators found convincing. But in the end, the petition was successful, and we were authorized to pay participants in accordance with the scale we had devised.

## What about Arguments against Compensation?

The arguments in favor of compensation in the context of our project came easily. But we could also readily imagine possible arguments *against* it. We wondered whether, even as paying participants addressed certain issues, it might unwittingly cause others. And while we have not yet run into objections to our practice, as the project evolves and we seek out new sources of funding, we can imagine encountering them in the future. In an effort to think more deeply about the ethics of payment, we surveyed the literatures of two fields with robust discussions of payment: journalism, with its position against payment of sources, and the social science and biomedical literature on payments to human research subjects. While there are many obvious differences between journalism and social science research on the one hand and oral history on the other, we reasoned that certain arguments from these adjacent fields might nevertheless be relevant.

In our survey of these literatures, we identified three main arguments opposing payment:

- (1) Payment taints the story that a source tells, or at least the audience's perception of that story. Traditional journalism looks askance at paying sources because of the belief that the exchange of money compromises the credibility of the source. In the US, mainstream media outlets typically reject the practice, referred to as *checkbook journalism*, and journalistic codes of ethics condemn it (the fact that tabloids routinely pay their sources merely reinforces the suspicion).<sup>16</sup> This rationale creeps into oral history as well: "It always seemed to me that if you paid for a story, you got one," observed one practitioner in an essay by Daphne Patai on ethical considerations in personal storytelling. A contributor to the H-OralHist thread discussed earlier likewise worried that "interviews could become devalued . . . becoming understood/misunderstood as 'testimonies that were paid for'—or, 'they were paid to say that.'" Another participant in the thread agreed: in the case of narrators who are victims of some form of abuse, payment could be used by "perpetrators and those who disagree . . . to discredit victim testimony."<sup>17</sup> In short, one reason not to pay narrators is that the exchange of money changes the substance of the interview in some way or discredits it in the eyes of observers.
- (2) Payment compromises narrators' consent. This argument against compensation, probably the one we spent the most time grappling with, concerns its impact not on *narrations* but on *narrators*. The ethics literature calls this conundrum *inducement*: offering people money may persuade them to do things they would not otherwise agree to do. According to this argument, if presented with compensation of too great a magnitude, prospective research participants will not be free to calculate the risks associated with their participation. They may be induced to participate against their better judgment. In this sense, payment can actually be coercive.

Fear of inducement is what one observer has called an "international orthodoxy"—a widely held belief that shapes protocols in human subject research globally.<sup>18</sup> Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) typically require that any compensation offered to research subjects be small enough that it does not constitute "undue influence." Of course, the question of how much compensation is too much is virtually impossible to answer—so most IRBs do not even try. The boards typically

operate with no written guidelines regarding subject compensation.<sup>19</sup> One study found wide and unexplained variation in payment amounts, even within the same institution or study.<sup>20</sup> While oral history projects are not subject to IRB approval, the behavior of these boards is nevertheless worth noting given that inducement—if in fact it exists—might be operative in oral history projects, no less than in other social science or biomedical research.<sup>21</sup>

- (3) Stories are like kidneys and babies: they may be gifted but they should never be bought or sold. This third argument against compensating narrators is that doing so boils down to the ethically problematic act of buying someone's story. Large bodies of literature on the social meanings of money and the morality of markets examine the cultural idea that there are some things money cannot—or should not—buy. Many people would argue, for example, that human organs and human infants should exist beyond the cash nexus. Likewise, certain kinds of relationships, above all intimate ones, are considered incompatible with monetary transaction. This is why we consider a sexual relationship that involves the transfer of money as fundamentally different from one that does not. In short, valuing certain goods or exchanges in monetary terms alters their essential character and may compromise their dignity.<sup>22</sup>

One could imagine a similar argument being made about personal narratives. Putting a price on a story commodifies it. Or perhaps the problem is not the story per se but introducing money into the relationship involved in storytelling. As a social practice, oral history is (or should be) governed by a nonmarket logic. The exchange of money compromises or corrupts the social intimacy between oral historian and narrator that the former may imagine their craft to involve.<sup>23</sup> Payment is therefore anathema to the essential values of the field.

Our project became an accidental opportunity to test some of these arguments. Because we began with no intention of compensating narrators, our first ten or so interviews were conducted with no mention of payment; in subsequent ones, we began mentioning it in a screening interview.<sup>24</sup> By comparing interviews conducted with and without expectation of compensation, we could ask, did compensation change stories, narrators, or oral history practice in some way? The answer, from our admittedly unscientific experiment, was no. There was no discernible difference in the scope, length, content, or other characteristics of the interviews.

What about the argument that hostile outsiders might dismiss narrators' stories as "bought"? In the current political environment, migrant testimonies highlighting the violence of US government officials are politically charged and vulnerable to challenge. Yet it made no sense to us to allow xenophobic critics to determine the terms of our narrators' participation. In fact, Customs and Border Protection routinely challenges allegations of violence at the border.<sup>25</sup> The lamentable fact is that those who enact or defend these policies will seek to discredit testimonies of migrants no matter the circumstances of their collection. At least for our project, we found this objection unconvincing.

The argument concerning inducement struck us as potentially more concerning. Given the dire material circumstances of our narrators, would they feel compelled to participate if offered compensation? IRBs' concerns with inducement tend to dwell on the amount of payment that constitutes undue influence, even as no guidelines exist on where exactly that

threshold lies. In the context of our project, this question was even more vexed. For narrators in rural Guatemala, almost *any* amount could be conceived as inducement. A modest payment of, say, \$10 would be equivalent to what a man earns for a day and a half of agricultural labor. If we accepted the essential premise of inducement, there was really *no* amount that could avoid undue influence.

Rather than dwelling on the issue of the amount, we decided to focus instead on how the payment was presented. We developed a protocol through a process that was, again, more accidental than deliberate. We conducted initial screening conversations to inform prospective narrators about the project's goals and assess their interest in participating. After they had had the opportunity to express possible interest, we went on to mention that participants would receive *una pequeña recompensa*—a small compensation.<sup>26</sup>

When we mentioned compensation, we did not specify the amount. In the beginning, this was not a purposeful effort to avoid inducement but a reflection of the fact we did not know how much the grant would authorize us to pay. In retrospect, it may have been a good practice. Most narrators did not know the amount they would be compensated until they received the money transfer. In the handful of cases in which they asked up front the amount they would receive, we told them.<sup>27</sup>

Another protocol that we developed also became important. At the end of the initial screening, after explaining the project's scope and purpose and mentioning the compensation, we asked narrators why they might want to participate in the project. The intention was to provide an opportunity for people to reflect carefully on their decision. One recurring answer that narrators gave was the power of their story to help others and effect change. A Guatemalan mother whose child was separated from her husband said she wanted the people who did this to understand the damage they had done. A mother from Honduras said she wanted to share her story "so that what happens to me doesn't happen to others." Another said she wanted her story "to help other people experiencing what I did." A Honduran father said, "I want to help create change. I want them to understand that we are not all bad."<sup>28</sup> In this way, the screening became an opportunity for narrators to consider the place of compensation within a broader conversation about the expectations and aspirations they brought to the project.

As their comments made clear, narrators had their own agendas for participating. Some wanted the opportunity to unburden themselves to a sympathetic listener. Others wanted to speak out to prevent family separation from happening again. No doubt for some the promise of compensation was an additional incentive. But focusing on the power of monetary inducement obfuscates the choice they exercised in deciding to participate—and ignores the many reasons they chose to do so. In the ethics literature, critics fault inducement for taking peoples' freedom away (they "cannot" say no, they are "obliged to" say yes). But as ethicists Martin Wilkinson and Andrew Moore argue, offering someone options (to participate, or not to participate) cannot be said to reduce their freedom. If anything, denying inducements actually "removes an option." Moreover, people do things all the time for monetary compensation, not the least of which is work. Many people consent to do certain jobs solely because of the pay. "In that sense," note Wilkinson and Moore, "wages are inducements"—yet no one would claim that workers should not be paid because wages fatally undermine their free will.<sup>29</sup>

To these reflections, we would add a final, anecdotal observation. It is worth noting that there were six prospective narrators who, even after hearing that they would be

compensated, chose not to participate. One father said that talking about what happened was too hard. Another mother did not have time. Contrary to predictions of “undue influence,” some people clearly felt free to decline participation in the project despite the mention of payment.

The final objection to narrator compensation—that stories are like kidneys and babies, which is to say they should never be bought and sold—we found to be likewise unconvincing. The fear that interviews will be tainted by a transactional exchange says less about how oral history works than it does about our pointed cultural ambivalence about the role of money in certain social relationships.<sup>30</sup> Does money compromise the essential value of personal testimonies? In fact, the opposite could just as easily be true. Compensating narrators is a way to recognize the *value* of their stories (as well as the time and effort required to tell them).

Finally, the argument that paying narrators amounts to buying someone’s story contradicts an axiom of oral history practice: the idea of the *cocreated narrative*. “The documents of oral history are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony,” writes Alessandro Portelli.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, he suggests that “we look at the act of speech, rather than at its outcome.”<sup>32</sup> His and other oral historians’ emphasis on “discourse in the making” rather than “finished discourse” provides a useful framing for talking about compensation. When a narrator receives payment, it is not for handing over a story but rather for creating one—it is for the “act of speech” rather than its “outcome.” As was very clear in our interviews, this process involves time, effort, and labor (intellectual, emotional, and more). If the interviewer is typically compensated for participation in this process, the narrator should be as well. Framing payment as compensation for participation in a *process* rather than as remuneration for a *product* also helps get us away from a thorny potential legal implication of payment: namely, that compensating narrators somehow transfers ownership of their stories to the interviewer.

A final consideration that arises in discussions of compensation concerns gifts. Gift-giving seems to be long-standing practice among anthropologists. In *Barracoon*, Zora Neale Hurston arrives at her interlocutor’s home with a basket of Georgia peaches and later a Virginia ham. Gifts reflect ideas of reciprocity and commensality. The limited information available suggests giving gifts to narrators is widely practiced in oral history. In contrast to concerns about monetary compensation, ethics guidelines often nod at gifts. The words *token* or *nominal* often accompany descriptions of them. The implication is that gifts are materially insignificant even as they may be symbolically important.

Gift-giving is no doubt culturally appropriate behavior in many contexts, and following appropriate cultural norms seems like good advice for everyone, including oral historians. Gifts may be necessary for establishing the grounds of intersubjectivity between narrator and interviewer. In our project, one disadvantage of remote interviews was that gift-giving was not possible.

But gifts are not compensation. They are voluntarily conferred rather than earned. They may complement compensation, but they are not interchangeable with it, nor a substitute for it. Conversely, providing payment does not obviate the need for gift-giving or other culturally appropriate behaviors in the context of social exchange.



## Compensation in the Context of Relationship Building

Ultimately, we came to understand compensation as embedded in the process of what Anna Kaplan calls “relationship-building” or what Crystal Baik terms the “relations and solidarities” that oral history aspires to produce.<sup>33</sup> Rather than a quid pro quo—our money for your story, or even for your participation—the payment was one element in this set of multiple exchanges and ongoing interactions.

We first contacted prospective narrators to explain the project and assess if they were interested in participating. Sometimes this involved multiple calls, for us to explain the project and for narrators to decide whether they trusted us and wanted to participate. One or more interviews then followed. After the interviews, we followed up with people, particularly in instances of very emotional interviews. Thereafter, we sought to stay in touch with families.

Two years after the first interviews, we continue to exchange regular messages with many of the project participants. We learned when one mother was evicted from her home by an owner wishing to repossess the land. When the Texas power grid collapsed during a storm in February 2020, we were in close touch with a mother and daughter who had no electricity or food, as well as with their worried husband/father in El Salvador. We have also participated in joyous news, such as when Ms. Pérez proudly sent a photo of her son, Julio, who, in the four years since she had last seen him, had grown from a baby-faced teen to a young man, wearing graduation robes at his Texas high school. In still another case, we have been able to share meals with three families currently living in New York City and even attend a workshop where a mom presented her writing.

We also had the opportunity to witness a development we did not anticipate at the beginning of the project. Shortly after taking office in early 2021, the Biden administration established the Interagency Task Force on the Reunification of Families. Parents separated from their children and deported to their country of origin were permitted back into the US with a three-year visa. We followed as parents gathered documents, boarded planes, and flew back to be reunited with the children they had not seen since the day they were separated by border authorities three, and sometimes more than four, years earlier. Reunification in the US has generated new needs. Families often request help understanding documents and legal processes. While all families have a case manager, there is clearly a dearth of support, and families often contact us with questions and concerns about work permits, rent payments, school enrollments, or how to navigate public transportation. In response to urgent material needs, we set up a GoFundMe with the honoraria we have received from speaking about the project. The fund helps meet small emergency expenses—a phone bill, a pair of boots, a ride to the doctor.

Relationships with the project participants—like all meaningful relationships—require time and effort to build and sustain. Not all of them have lasted. But whether these exchanges endure or not, we hope that narrators can regard them as substantive relationships with an empathetic and responsive person who took an interest not only in their story but in the circumstances of their lives. In a second phase of the project, we are creating a WhatsApp discussion group so that narrators, most of whom do not know other formerly separated parents, can build community with others who went through similar experiences.

The payments we disbursed to narrators were embedded in this constellation of interactions and exchanges. Compensation did not substitute for relationship building; it was

part of that process, and probably not even the most important part. Other oral history practitioners have come to a similar framing. As Gabriel Solis of Texas after Violence told us, “It’s easy to Venmo people. It’s hard to maintain relationships.”<sup>34</sup>

## The Logistics of Payment

Having explained why we compensated our narrators and the role that payment came to play in the project, we turned to another question: *how* to pay people. It turned out that in many ways, the biggest hurdles we faced in compensating narrators were not ethical or financial, but logistical. Even once we were given permission to compensate participants, figuring out how to disburse the monies turned out to be a major bureaucratic conundrum. Some details of that conundrum may be specific to our case, but we suspect that our experience was not unique. We narrate some of our experience not only to help others but also to make clear that resolving payment logistics requires significant time and labor that itself should figure into project budgets.

University payment systems can be maddening in the best of circumstances. As we discovered in the context of our project, they are especially poorly suited for international payments, for payees who cannot fill out paperwork in English, for those with a precarious legal status who do not want to reveal personal information, and for paying relatively small amounts of money to a relatively large number of people.

For starters, disbursements need to fit under a rubric legible to the payment system in order to know what procedure to follow. Should narrators be considered consultants? Independent contractors? Guest speakers? Research subjects? Answering this question involved countless email exchanges not only with grant administrators and budget and finance officers but even with university counsel.

An initially appealing idea was to treat payments to narrators as honoraria. After all, universities routinely pay honoraria to guest speakers; like these guests, narrators, too, shared their expertise with us in one-off encounters. But it quickly became clear that this strategy would not work. Paying an honorarium required lengthy paperwork that would be impossible for our narrators, most of whom were operating on cell phones, remotely, with no English. What is more, collecting W9s and other forms would require people with uncertain legal status to reveal potentially sensitive information about themselves.

Faced with these hurdles, we gave up on honoraria and went with plan B: to consider narrator compensation as congruous with the “subject fee” given to participants in research studies. Of course, the monies paid to research subjects are often framed as a small gift for participation and are often for nominal amounts, whereas we sought to pay potentially hundreds of dollars per “subject.” In the end, though, this strategy prevailed. While our payments were much greater than the typical subject fee, they were still well below the tax threshold that would have touched off additional paperwork. The irony is not lost on us that, even as we have worked to create a framework for talking about narrator payment as earned remuneration, for the purposes of the university payment system, we were forced back into framing it as a thank-you gift.

The next question was what form these payments would take. Gift cards are, of course, a common currency through which research subjects are compensated, and institutional payment protocols often make it easier to purchase gift cards than to distribute cash. Gift cards may also be appealing because they allow us to sidestep our

cultural ambivalence about monetary transactions. Gift cards are money, but also, partly, well—gift.

Yet they are not necessarily best for participants themselves. In earlier work as a case manager with low-income HIV+ people, García found that many people had trouble redeeming gift cards. These challenges ranged from a lack of transportation to the store to language barriers and a misunderstanding of how gift cards operate. For our project, the issue was moot, given that most of our narrators were located in rural Central America.

Instead, we sent money via various wire services commonly used by immigrants located in the US to send remittances back home. While we found these services remarkably easy to navigate, wiring money was not without surprises. It turns out that sending money to rural Guatemala is relatively economical, but sending it to narrators without bank accounts located in Texas and Arkansas via such services as Western Union is expensive to the point of usury. We compared different services (exchange fees and rates vary widely) in search of the best options. Overall, the payment logistics saga reinforced the fact that compensating narrators through institutions may require patience and persistence. This labor should figure into project design and budgets. We also came to appreciate that a creative and dedicated administrative staff was essential to our eventual success.

## Conclusions

Our project was just one of a half-dozen projects at the college receiving support from the same Mellon grant. Several other projects also involved oral history or interviews. Our decision to compensate narrators catalyzed similar requests: when the faculty overseeing those projects learned that we had successfully requested funds for participant payment, they understandably wanted to do the same. They also wanted to know how much their own narrators could expect. Faced with the need to fund participant compensation for multiple interview-based projects, our grant administrator suggested developing a standardized narrator pay scale to be applied across the board.

The request for a standardized scale made perfect sense, given the administrator's desire to ensure equity and consistency across projects. But the conversations that ensued quickly revealed that a one-size-fits-all pay scale was not just elusive, it was unwise. We had designed our compensation in keeping with the profiles of our narrators, the nature of the interviews, and the wider political context of the project. Because each project was different, payment, it seemed to us, could vary accordingly as well.

Instead of a standardized scale of *amounts*, what we developed as a result of these conversations is a general set of *criteria* by which to determine whether and how much to pay narrators in a given project. These criteria concern the profile of the narrators, the nature of the interviews, and the broad context of the project. This list—the touchstones of situated compensation—is hardly exhaustive. But we include it in the hope it may spur conversations, both among those who design oral history projects and those who participate in, administer, or fund them. They include the following considerations:

- (1) The economic, social, or legal precarity of the narrators and the various vulnerabilities and forms of exploitation to which they are subjected in the broad context of their lives

- (2) The length of the interviews, and more generally, the burdens they impose for narrators (in terms of time, transportation, technology, and such)
- (3) The depth and scope of trauma touched on in the interviews and hence the emotional labor required of narrators
- (4) The unique public, political, or historical value of the interviews
- (5) The political context of the project
- (6) The objectives or deliverables of the project, and specifically whether the interviews are ends in themselves that will be made available in their entirety in an archive or used in some other form from which the public will derive value
- (7) The resources available for the project

Although it was not our case, many oral history projects are of course community-based, involving narrators who are members of a given community. One recommendation that emerged from our exchanges with other oral historians is that even though payments are typically made to individuals, it is important to consider the wider community of which they are a part, and specifically:

- (1) The extent to which the community or group has previously been subjected to extractive forms of storytelling
- (2) The fact that paying people for participation can create interpersonal issues within a community (as when payment is perceived as “blood money” paid to participants who have experienced, and then been paid to talk about, their victimhood) and that it is incumbent on project designers to be aware of such dynamics<sup>35</sup>
- (3) The possibility that in some circumstances it might make sense for compensation to be directed to the community rather than to individuals within it

We also generated a series of practical recommendations regarding payment:

- (1) Institutional payment systems are not necessarily well-suited to narrator compensation; working out hurdles requires creativity and persistence. Finance and grant staff are indispensable allies in this process. The time and resources necessary to pay people should be accounted for in project design and budgets.
- (2) If you pay cash, be aware of the tax implications for narrators as well as its possible implications for those receiving public assistance. It is incumbent upon project leaders to avoid these consequences and to make sure that participants understand them.
- (3) Whenever possible, give narrators flexibility and options in payment. Cash may be preferable but institutional payment systems may make disbursing it impossible. In this case, cash cards, which carry value and can be redeemed almost anywhere, may be a next-best option. Be aware of the challenges of redeeming store-based gift cards.
- (4) Some projects provide the option for participants to donate their compensation (for example, narrators who work with the Texas after Violence Project are given the option to donate their compensation to the National Bail Fund).<sup>36</sup>

We recognize that any argument for situated compensation is premised on a key assumption: the existence of resources to pay narrators in the first place. Funded by a generous

foundation grant, we were in a privileged position in this regard. Many projects do not have access to such resources. Yet scarcity should not be accepted as an immutable circumstance. We believe that if funders appreciate why compensation may be appropriate or necessary, they will be more willing to dedicate resources to it.

It is an especially propitious moment to make the case to funders. Major foundations have hitched their traditional promotion of arts and humanities to a bold vision of social justice. The Mellon Foundation, for example, seeks “to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking.”<sup>37</sup> The Ford Foundation aspires for its philanthropy to “catalyze leaders and organizations driving social justice.”<sup>38</sup> As part of their aspiration to attend to power relations, challenge inequalities, and advance social justice, arts and humanities funders will need to tackle conversations about who is paid, how much, and on what terms. In creating recommendations or guidelines in the matter, these powerful institutions can help to create a more general culture of payment. Of course, not all projects receive funding from these organizations, but parallel considerations should apply, for example, to grassroots fundraising for community-based projects.

The preceding discussion raises questions about the place of compensation in myriad scenarios. For example, historians routinely collect oral histories as one of several sources to build a historical argument. Should oral histories conducted for this purpose, rather than as archival ends in themselves, be compensated? If a Guatemalan oral historian without access to resources from the Mellon Foundation conducted interviews with these same migrant families, would she adopt the same payment practices as we did? Last year, we began conducting oral histories with the *defensores*. Should we compensate them? (We did not).

Just because we can imagine many scenarios in which oral historians cannot or do not or might not compensate does not mean that in other instances they should not. This is the meaning of situated compensation. We do not pretend to offer answers in all possible scenarios. We suggest only that project designers and funders should ask these questions in the first place.

Ultimately, in the case of our project, of course, we decided that narrator compensation was an ethical necessity. We reached this conclusion based on a variety of considerations, from the dire economic circumstances of the narrators to the length, content, and unique value of the interviews. Also paramount was the symbolic truth-and-reconciliation function we felt our oral history project might rehearse, in the absence of real redress for people who had experienced violence at the hands of US border authorities. These monetary payments to our narrators were merely one element in a *panoply* of interactions. With our narrators we exchanged information, resources, support, pleasantries, favors, jokes, photos, holiday greetings, and emojis, in addition to money—which is to say, we sought to build relationships with them.

The discussion we hope to advance with this essay has relevance not just to the oral history field. Many of the issues we have discussed here apply to participatory or community-based research or cultural work in general. Questions of compensation are ultimately inseparable from all the other big issues implicated in this work—about consent, ownership, power, and reciprocity. But any consideration of the issue must first rescue it from silence. We hope this article contributes to that goal.

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After more than four years of separation, Ms. Pérez and her family were given a temporary parole to return to the US to reunite with Julio. Currently, the family is living

in Texas. Ms. Pérez is extremely grateful that the family is together again, even as they live in the looming shadow of another separation once their parole expires. The two younger children are in school. Since graduating from high school, Julio has been working but has not given up on his dream of going to college. Asked what he would like to study when he gets there, he replied without hesitation: he wants to major in history.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following interlocutors for generously sharing their thoughts and experiences and helping us to think through the issues discussed in this article: Isabella Cosse, Danielle Dulken, Sarah Dziedzic, Jess Lamar Reece Holler, Premilla Nadasen, Gabriel Solis, Amy Starecheski, and Erin Vong. We also greatly benefited from conversations with Virginia Espino and Alisa del Tufo on other ethical aspects of our project. Participants in the Columbia Latin American History Workshop offered invaluable feedback, as did two anonymous readers and editor Abigail Perkiss. Mariana Katz, graduate project coordinator, has been an indispensable collaborator and intellectual partner. We thank Kari Steeves of Barnard's Office of Institutional Funding and Sponsored Research and Sarah Greene, project administrator, for generative dialogues on the issue. The Barnard and Columbia students in successive iterations of Seeking Asylum: Politics, History, and the Search for Justice at the US-Mexico Border have contributed to this project in innumerable ways—so, too, have our collaborators at Women's Refugee Commission and Justice in Motion, including the *defensores*. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge funding from the Mellon Foundation's Barnard Engages grant.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. The names in this anecdote have been changed.
2. All quotes from narrators are from the interviews conducted as part of this project. For now, we have opted to share these excerpts anonymously. For more on the project, visit the website <https://separatedoralhistories.org>.
3. Danielle Dulken, "Fuck You, Pay Me': An Argument for Payment in Oral History," a paper she presented at the 2018 Oral History Association conference, <https://www.danielledulken.com/writing/paymentdulken>; Jess Lamar Reece Holler, "Equity Budgeting: A Manifesto," <http://marionvoices.org/equity-budgeting/>
4. H-Net, H-OralHist thread, "Payment for Interviews," May 2015, <https://networks.hnet.org/node/16738/discussions/70916/payment-interviews>.
5. As Sommer and Quinlan note, projects may also use "a contract form, stipulating, for example, a token \$1 payment or promising the narrator a bound copy of the interview transcript." Either way, the framing assumes that the transaction involves a donation, not a sale, and any money given the narrator is understood as "a token"; see Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 18.
6. Conversation with Erin Vong, June 17, 2021. Sommer and Quinlan's *Oral History Manual* mentions compensation only in passing ("generally narrators are not paid, although in some circumstances, a gift may be given," p. 18); Yow's 1994 *Recording Oral History* briefly mentions the issue but offers no definitive guidance in the matter (p. 106). Interestingly, a more recent edition of the guide eliminates mention of narrator compensation altogether; see Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 1994).



7. Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon: The Last "Black Cargo"* (n.p.: Amistad Press, 2018); On the Federal Writer's Project, see <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Alessandro Portelli, "A Dialogical Relationship. An Approach to Oral History," <http://oral-history.ir/?page=post&id=4185>; Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 2010); Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (New York: Routledge: 2017).
8. On the historical roots of Central American migration, see Aviva Chomsky, *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence and the Roots of Migration* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2022). Journalistic accounts of Central American migration include Oscar Martínez, *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America* (London: Verso, 2017); and Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* (New York: Random House, 2007). For a journalist's account of "zero tolerance," see Jacob Soboroff's *Separated: Inside an American Tragedy* (New York: Harper Collins: 2020).
9. Rachel Nolan, "A Translation Crisis at the Border," *New Yorker*, December 30, 2019.
- 10 "Executive Order on the Establishment of Interagency Task Force on the Reunification of Families," February 2, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-the-establishment-of-interagency-task-force-on-the-reunification-of-families/>.
11. It is worth noting that human rights violations at the border neither began with Trump nor ended with him. While the situation undoubtedly worsened during his tenure, the Trump administration was hardly exceptional. It reflects a longer-running normalization of illegal, unethical, and ultimately ineffectual immigration policies pursued for particular political ends.
12. "Trump's Separation of Families Constitutes Torture, Doctors Find," *Guardian*, February 25, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/25/trump-family-separations-children-torture-psychology>; Sam Levin, "'We Tortured Families': The Lingering Damage of Trump's Separation Policy," *Guardian*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/04/trump-administration-family-separation-immigrants-joe-biden>; "Ocasio-Cortez Wants '9/11-Style Commission' on Family Separations," *Guardian*, July 20, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/20/ocasio-cortez-911-style-commission-migrant-family-separations>.
13. "Hundreds of Migrant Children Remain Separated from Families Despite Push to Reunite Them," PBS, February 26, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/hundreds-of-migrant-children-remain-separated-from-families-despite-push-to-reunite-them>.
14. Crystal Mun-hye Baik, "From 'Best' to Situated and Relational: Notes Toward a Decolonizing Praxis," *Oral History Review* 49, no. 1 (April, 2022): 3.
15. The apt term *opportunistic redistribution* was suggested to us by Caitlin Liss.
16. Terje Skjerdal, "Checkbook Journalism/Payment for Coverage," in *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0082>.
17. First quote is from: Daphne Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" *International Journal of Oral History* 8, no. 1 (1987): 15; the second two quotes are from the 2015 H-OralHist thread cited above.
18. The phrase is from Martin Wilkinson and Andrew Moore, "Inducement in Research," *Bioethics* 11, no. 5 (1997): 373–89.
19. Neal Dickert, Emanuel Ezekiel, and Christine Grady, "Paying Research Subjects: Analysis of Current Policies," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 136, no. 5 (2002): 368-373.
20. That is, there was variation across different studies in the same institution as well as across different study sites within the same study; see C. Grady et al., "An Analysis of U.S. Practices of Paying Research Participants." *Contemporary Clinical Trials* 26, no. 3 (2005): 365-375.
21. On oral history's relationship to IRBs, see: <https://oralhistory.org/information-about-irbs/>.

22. Viviana Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).
23. There is a large literature on the social and cultural meanings of money, including its relationship to social intimacy; see, for example, Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy*; and Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*.
24. We later went back and compensated these individuals.
25. In one example of many, CBP disputed allegations of child abuse based on children's testimonies: <https://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights/ice-and-border-patrol-abuses/cbp-fails-discredit-our-report-abuse-immigrant>
26. We struggled with what to call this (*payment? stipend?*). *Compensation* seemed best because it linked the money to something—in this case, the narrator's participation. But our conversations brought home the lack of a standard language to talk about these issues.
27. It is worth noting that these interviews were not discernably different from those in which the narrators did not inquire.
28. These quotes come from our interviews, which are not yet publicly available.
29. Wilkinson and Moore, "Inducement in Research," 376-7.
30. Zelizer, *Purchase of Intimacy*. The tendency to treat stories as sacred touchstones also contradicts the "settler proprietor" logic that, Crystal Mun-hyen Baik notes, informs oral history practice (Baik, "From 'Best' to Situated and Relational.") We thank Amy Starecheski for making this observation.
31. Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 39.
32. Alessandro Portelli, "A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History," *Expressions Annual* 14 (2005): 1-8.
33. Anna F. Kaplan, "Cultivating Supports While Venturing into Interviewing during COVID-19," *Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (July 2, 2020): 218; Baik, "From 'Best to Situated and Relational," 3.
34. Conversation with Gabriel Solis, June 18, 2021.
35. Danielle Dulkan makes point 8; an anonymous reviewer helpfully raised point 9.
36. Conversation with Gabriel Solis, June 18, 2021.
37. Mellon Foundation, <https://mellon.org/news-blog/articles/mellon-foundation-announces-transformation-its-strategic-direction-and-new-focus-social-justice/>.
38. Ford Foundation, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/>.

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