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Archiving Latinxs on the U.S. Great Plains: Voices of a Pandemic Oral History Collection

Wendy Guerra

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Respect for Hybridity: Creating Inclusive and
Accessible Archives

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Voces of a Pandemic

UNO / Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) / Voces of a Pandemic

Voces of a Pandemic

Voces of a Pandemic is an ongoing project that seeks to examine how Latinos describe their experiences during COVID-19. Our objective is to interview Latinos in Omaha to record their narratives allowing us to learn, understand, disseminate, and archive the experiences of our community during this historic time. Besides UNO-OLLAS, fourteen universities and organizations in the United States are part of this collaboration. Your interviews will be archived at UNO's Criss library.

https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences/ollas/voces-of-a-pandemic.php

DEPARTMENT NAME

Over the course of the past two years, the University of Nebraska at Omaha Libraries Archives and Special Collections has made 21 Voces of a Pandemic oral histories available online. These interviews, collected by the Director of UNO's Office of Latino and Latin American Studies (known as OLLAS), were transferred to both UNO archives and the University of Texas at Austin, as they were conducted in partnership with the Voces Oral History Center. This Voces project sought to document and examine how the Latinx population in Omaha described their experiences during the

COVID-19 pandemic. As the Digital Initiatives Archivist at UNO, I was not part of the project to conduct and collect these interviews; rather I joined the project when the interviews were ready to be transferred to the archives. Today, I'm going to share with you why UNO prioritized this project and the work that was involved in making interviews accessible online. I'll be sharing the difficulties we dealt with, as well as my plans for moving forward.

Screen shot of Archives and Special Collections Collecting Policy.

Archives and Special Collections at UNO serves university users, the Omaha community, and all other researchers by providing access to our collections both in person and online. We have three collecting areas: University Archives, Manuscript collections, and books and published material. In spring 2021 we revised our collecting policy with a commitment meant to "*increase the representation of Black, Native and Indigenous, Latino and Hispanic, Asian American, LGBTQIA2S+, women, and the disabled as creators*

and voices in the collection. [We aim to acknowledge and work] to uplift the voices that have not been prioritized through historical records for preservation and access. This work is important to creating a more complete picture of history, in particular the UNO and Omaha communities." (*https://www.unomaha.edu/criss-library/about-us/library-policies/archives-policies.php#asccollecting*) At the same time that we were revising our collecting policy with an intentionality of increasing representation within our collections, the Director of Latino and Latin American Studies reached out to the Director of the Archives about a potential grant opportunity with UNO's Office of Research and Creative Activity (ORCA). This grant was designed to hire work-study students and engage them in faculty research and creative activity while providing mentorship, and the OLLAS director envisioned a joint project between our department and his that would involve his soon to be transferred collection of bi-lingual oral histories, the Voces collection. I was quickly brought into the loop as the person who would be handling the oral history collection and partnering on the grant.

Archives and Special Collections knew from previously working on a large oral history project, that to archive and make the Voces of Pandemic oral history collection available online we would need to hire additional staff to supplement my time and effort. So the grant recommended by the OLLAS Director was a unique opportunity for ASC to secure additional funding. The OLLAS Director applied for the grant and fortunately secured it, which set in motion a domino effect of Archives and Special Collections securing additional matching grant funds; the project was funded in part by Humanities Nebraska, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and the UNO Libraries' Eugene S. and Sunny M. Thomas Fund for Innovation. It was really important to us as a department to obtain funds to work on this project; it perfectly fit our goal to increase representation in our collections and was clearly a meaningful set of interviews that could have great community impact. The trio of grant funds allowed us to design a project that began with the OLLAS Director and I hiring a shared student employee.

Screen shot of summaries and transcripts work folder.

Screen shot of partial oral history training materials list.

Hiring this student employee was a difficult, it was critical that we needed bi-lingual student who also had work-study and if you hire student employees, you might have an idea of the difficulty of these parameters. The COVID-19 pandemic impact on hiring was certainly felt in this situation. We tried to overcome some of the roadblocks to short term employment by offering a higher than typical wage (for campus) and allowed remote work to accommodate a students' work and school schedule. Remote work was also beneficial at the

time because the library wasn't yet fully open due to covid procedures. We tried our best to consider the reality of a work-study student likely having another off-campus job and life responsibilities on top of schoolwork. As it was, it took us three months to hire a student, which resulted in us needing to extend the original grant award window into the summer, but we did eventually get there.

When the student employee started, I provided training materials that gave background on what oral histories were, why they were important, and how to transcribe and summarize them. At UNO we use the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer to present our oral histories to users, so I also had detailed instructions on how to index and sync interviews for access via the OHMS web app, but we got started with the basics first.

To ensure ethical, equitable access, written summaries and transcriptions were needed for each oral history interview. We had a goal that these would also be bi-lingual. Under the ORCA grant, I served as a mentor while the OLLAS Director instructed the student employee's work for his research needs. Fortunately, what he needed were

interview summaries.

When the initial ORCA grant funds were spent after about two months of work, the student transitioned to working solely under my direction as a library student employee. By this time, the oral history collection had been transferred to Archives and Special Collections and nearly all of the interviews had 1 page summaries in both Spanish and English. Rough drafts of transcripts for the English interviews had also been created using Otter.ai. The Spanish interview transcripts needed to be created from scratch.

Now since this was the first large oral history project I was working on and I needed to get a feel for how long tasks took while working with both Spanish and English materials, I drew up plan for the student employee to do a time test of sorts comparing how long it took to transcribe an interview that had a first pass done by Otter.ai and one that was created from scratch. The student had already listened to all of the interviews to create the summaries, so I thought we'd be in a pretty solid place for creating transcriptions. However, working within the confines of library employee expectations proved a bit

difficult for my student, and his time test revealed that work took 2-3 times what I expected based on research I'd done to gauge how long transcription should take. We had a deadline of completing a portion of the work within a set time frame due to the Humanities Nebraska grant, so I tried to adjust course and clearly lay out expectations for progress.

As it turned out, my student told me that he preferred creating the transcriptions from scratch better than dealing with the machine generated errors created by Otter and his time indicated that it was slightly faster. And although the amount of time it took wasn't were I hoped it would be, I trusted his time recording. We were working with the Otter transcriptions, because that's what the OLLAS director created, but I think there might be better options for interviews involving subjects with accents. It's just what we had to work with at the time. The student spent about two months working on transcription; about 18 hours a week except when he had other life things and school responsibilities. This roughly 150 hours of work translated into 17 transcripts, or about 8 hours per interview with some time spent finalizing the

translations of interview summaries. Time spent on transcription was about twice as long as I was hoping, but it was the first time we were working on such a project, so I took it in stride with some frustration about time management on the students end and their ongoing reluctance to work onsite; it continued to be an issue no matter how many times I tried to casually address it.

At this point we had reached the stage of spending the funds from our Humanities NE grant and it was time to train my student on OHMS work. This is where we encountered a major roadblock. After repeated efforts to have the student work onsite (which they often worked in the library, just not in the department where I could see them, so being on campus wasn't a problem) and train on OHMS because they were unable to follow the written instructions and they weren't interested in a recorded video demo, I gave them a new set of interviews to summarize, translate, and transcribe. The OLLAS director had completed a few more interviews in a 2nd round of his project and instead of waiting to work on them until a later date, I allowed the student to continue in a track of work he

felt comfortable with while I tried to figure out what to do to move forward. Unfortunately, the situation continued to go down hill with time and tasks being recorded less than accurately and some evasive answers being provided when asked for accountability of time. Over the course of 6 weeks, I never was able to schedule the student for training on OHMS and ultimately decided that it would be best to let this student go. This is of course an over simplification of the matter, but I share it because it was a major problem while I tried to move this project forward. At this point, the project was several months behind schedule and I was two months away from taking leave myself; it was stressful! Throughout this stage, I communicated with the OLLAS Director letting him know where we stood on the project and eventually let him know that I'd need to resume work upon my return from leave. Luckily, I learned that the 3rd grant we had, offered the most flexibility and there was not a risk of us losing the funds if not used within a set time frame as was the case with the other funds.
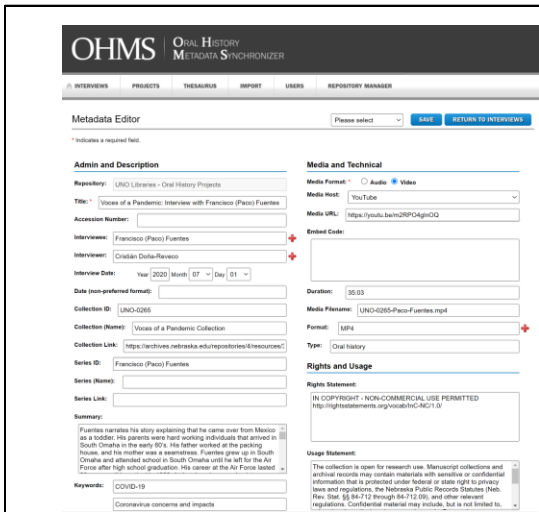
Screen shot of Paco Fuentes oral history interview record in OHMS web app metadata editor.

Screen shot of Paco Fuentes oral history interview transcript syncing in OHMS.

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

When I returned to work in June, a full year after I started this project, I had to focus my attention on a migration of our digital files to different storage. So it wasn't until August that I looked at the project with fresh eyes and assigned my regular student employee to begin work on it. From a discussion with the Archives Director, I knew that we had some flexibility in utilizing the remaining grant funds, so I decided to have my student employee who I had already trained on OHMS for other projects, begin work on the Voces of a Pandemic collection.

Now about the process: as I said, we use OHMS. Which means that we upload all of our videos to YouTube which integrates with the OHMS backend. Once the Voces of a Pandemic videos were uploaded to YouTube, I created records in OHMS and added item level metadata. My student employee indexed the interviews, then uploaded and synced the transcripts. OHMS provides users with word-level search capability and a time-correlated transcript or indexed interview connecting the textual search term to the corresponding moment in the recorded interview online. Archives and Special Collections primary purpose for using OHMS is to empower users to more effectively and efficiently discover information in an online oral history interview.

The OHMS work required a lot of attention to detail and was pretty time intensive. Additionally, in the course of our work, we learned that some of the videos needed to have portions cut to eliminate some data that should not have been recorded as part of the interview for privacy reasons. This was a downside of me not listening to each interview from the beginning and relying on student labor. We had

to backtrack and do some fixing; it would have been preferable if that information had been passed on by my first student employee, but things just didn't occur that way. Regardless, it worked out. We made the edits as needed and re-uploaded to YouTube and moved on. By November, my student and I had finished the OHMS work and the next step was adding these interviews to UNO's Digital Collections platform.
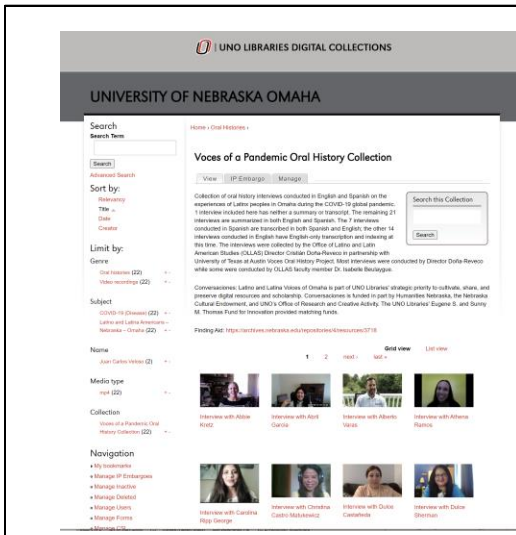
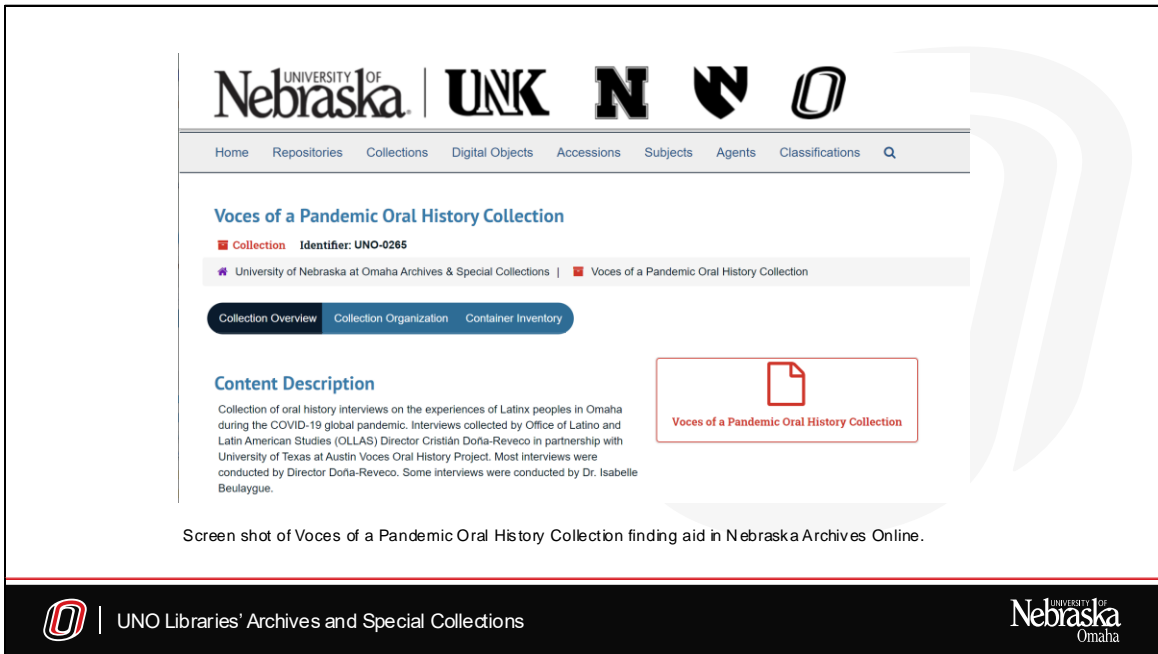Screen shot of Voces of a Pandemic Oral History Collection in UNO's Digital Collections.
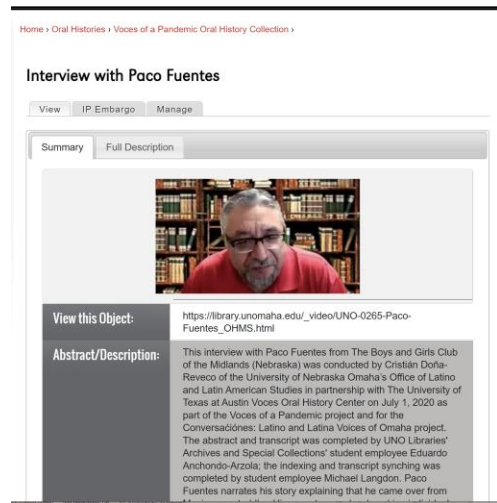
Screen shot of Paco Fuentes's individual oral history interview record.

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections

We currently use a LYRASIS-hosted instance of Islandora 7 to provide access to many of our digital collections. As with much of this project, there were some complex decisions to be made when adding these interviews to our digital collections. OHMS does not integrate with Islandora and we weren't using Islandora's designated video content model, so I had to make a call about how to present these resources. Ultimately, I decided on a record for each interview that includes a thumbnail of the interviewee, and allows us to present a single

summary along with some basic metadata. If a user clicks further into the record, they can see a translation of the summary. Unfortunately, just due to how Islandora displays things, I was unable to have bilingual summaries coherently displayed alongside each other. Each record also provides the link to the oral history as it is presented in the OHMS viewer, which is the preferred way to interact with the material. The user can then click through the index to get an overview or toggle between that and the transcript that is synced with the video for easy navigation of the resource.

We called this project finished for now when my student employee graduated and we successfully put 21 interviews with bilingual summaries online in December of 2022. 7 of the Spanish interviews have bilingual transcription. The other 14 English interviews have English-only transcription simply due to who we had available to work on this project. A final interview was never summarized or transcribed by the bilingual student employee I had at the beginning of the project, so it is available online without either; I thought some access was better than none. While we're calling this done for

now, there are 2 additional interviews that have been collected since my student employee finished this last December and 1 that was a problem needing attention from the Director of OLLAS. Archives and Special Collections is currently prioritizing the processing and eventually the select digitization of the OLLAS department records in connection with their 20th anniversary this year, along with one of the founders papers. Ideally we will be able to finish the few remaining interviews too.

Screen shot of Voces of a Pandemic Oral History Collection finding aid in Nebraska Archives Online.

This has been quite an eventful project, where I encountered issues I hadn't anticipated and my projected timeline was way off. At times the collection was difficult to work with due to my lack of Spanish speaking and reading skills. Despite this, the relationship I built with OLLAS is strong and I'm very proud of the work we've done. We worked hard to ensure that this collection was as accessible as I could make it; users can discover the oral history interviews through our finding aid in Nebraska Archives Online, through our UNO Digital

Collections, and even through YouTube although they won't have all the extra OHMS metadata there. Since the collection has gone live on our digital collections platform, most interviews have been viewed between 130-150 times, with just three interviews being access less than 100 times. It is really rewarding knowing that this collection is being used. I look forward to more projects in this same vein and will take lessons learned into the future.

Thank you!

Wendy Guerra

Digital Initiatives Archivist, Assistant Professor

wguerra@unomaha.edu

UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections