Transcript

Speculative Telephone: Oral Historians and Digital Librarians on How Libraries Could Be

Kae Bara Kratcha

TRACK 01. KRATCHA'S INTRODUCTION [Hear episode on Spotify]

You're listening to Speculative Telephone: Oral Historians and Digital Librarians on How Libraries Could Be. This is a piece that I produced for the Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship's special issue called Turning It Off and Back on Again: Speculative Digital Librarianship. My name is Kae Bara Kratcha. I'm a liaison librarian, and I'm also an oral historian.

So I recently graduated from the Oral History Master's program at Columbia. And since graduating, I've been interested in sort of trying to figure out what oral history can teach us in libraries about knowledge, and the way we share knowledge, and the way we think about knowledge as people who preserve and sort of move knowledge forward into the future. So what I did to try to start getting at that goal is I interviewed three oral historians who I know through the oral history program at Columbia about their relationship to libraries and what they think an ideal library or ideal libraries could be like for them and their work and the people they work with in their oral history work.

And then I took each of those interviews and edited them down to 10 minutes. And I asked three librarians--three digital librarians--to listen to the edited versions that I made of my conversations with the oral historians, and react to that and speculate a little bit about what their lives and work would be like and maybe feel like if what the oral historian said were true.

So this has been kind of an experiment in method. I have certainly used my oral history training and doing these interviews, but they aren't quite oral history interviews, because, you know, we didn't really go deep into anyone's life history, we kept the questions pretty focused on work, as insofar as that is possible. But we did go on quite a few tangents, which I think is a hallmark of at least my oral history practice. So you're gonna hear a lot of wandering, and you're gonna hear a lot of topics kind of coming in and out throughout each interview. And also between interviews.

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I hope that hearing this piece in audio and hearing it in a conversational mode allows you to sort of feel the ideas that are coming from the interviews, even if they are ideas that you've maybe heard before. And I hope that the act of listening will help you engage in a new way with the idea of a journal article. That's something that we sort of talked about in the interviews of like, what can a journal article or a scholarly conversation be? So this was kind of an experiment in that.

I hope that it worked. I think that speculating about our work is an important means of imagining and understanding what could be possible, and also what's already possible and what's already happening, which is something that came up over and over again, in these interviews--that sometimes what library users want, and even sometimes what library workers want, are things that already exist in our work, and we could just sort of expand on them. So I hope that you enjoy listening to this. I hope that this is a way of engaging with a scholarly conversation that feels good and not boring. And I also would love to hear from you if you're a listener. And I'll say more about how you can sort of respond back to this piece at the end. In the meantime, I'm so excited for you to hear the audio and the conversations that I've been working on for the past summer, summer 2023.

CHAPTER 1. DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACE

TRACK 02. ORAL HISTORIAN CHRIS PANDZA [Hear episode on Spotify]

Chris Pandza: My name is Chris Pandza. I am a graduate of the Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) program at Columbia. My interest in oral history both as a reader of it and a producer of it goes back to my undergrad days in the early-mid 2010s. I was really drawn to oral history through practice, but now most of my work is actually related to working with interviews that already exist and working with archival materials. So I specifically as of late have been looking at large oral history collections that are very difficult for any one person to navigate and trying to organize and analyze them, using natural language processing and other kinds of AI to just index the material and now also to create some user experiences. So yeah, I work lately, mostly with sources that have already been produced.

Kratcha: Like, what do you think a library is?

Pandza: A really hard question. Okay, so libraries maybe in North America mean something different than other places. Because for me, I think of libraries as--one of their big functions, at least in North American context is true public space. They're--not always but often--they're funded with public funds, and they're places where you don't need to purchase something to exist. They're places where you can take an ESL class, you can have an interest group, you can have a focus group. And so being a public space is really important. And I think, part of-- because I'm not from the United States--and being here, and having access to some of these really amazing private libraries is strange

to me, because I think of libraries as like, oh, this is our public space. Because we don't like have like piazzas or anything in North America. Or places, you can just like loiter and linger.

So private libraries to me, make me think, okay, wait, libraries are actually doing--they're not just spaces. They are like stewarding things, and they have other functions. So I think the other thing that I think of when I think of libraries is--and maybe this is more core--is providing access to information. Yeah, providing access to information. And that's maybe why I have a pretty agnostic view toward-- I don't necessarily distinguish between digital libraries versus physical libraries beyond just that one is also often a really important provider of public space and programming.

Kratcha: What would it look like to treat a digital library as a public space?

Pandza: So I think a lot of that has to do with design. So there's part of me that wants to give you an answer that is, oh, you know, facilitating, you know, interactions online and like having a blog section like--Sure. Sure. But I think my actual response is that it should feel like it's built for the public. And part of that is connected to what I was saying before about designing things to meet users at their point of access. And not expecting users to try to take on additional learning to just access things. I think it's probably the job of the library to serve the public in that way. That's one thing.What does it look like for a digital library to function as a public space? It's tough, right? Because I guess what-- maybe what I want to think about is, what are public-- What are digital public spaces in general, like even before a library? And then maybe even before that, what are public spaces?

I mean, a public space is a space where you can hang out, where you're not necessarily expected to do or buy anything with you're not being monetized or unintentionally generating labor or unknowingly generating labor. Where you can have chance interactions. I think that's a big thing. So maybe in my head, public space would be like a version of Twitter that's run by Wikimedia Group. Like it just like something that's not for profit, and where people can just kind of like chat, maybe that's like the most one to one, like digital public space, I can think of.

What does it mean for a digital library to function as a public space? I'm just, I'm not sure that I can. I'm not sure that it can. Unless you're providing resources for people to convene.

Here's how it might. So one of the things that is awesome about libraries is community groups. Any group can use the facilities for free, use of technology--I think--largely for free, to facilitate conversation, connection, etc. It'd be awesome for a library, thinking about a library as a public space, to offer those same kinds of things. So you know, somebody to host your like-- to help you set up a Zoom thing for your community group. To even, you know, send you equipment to do--this is because I have equipment in front of me; we're doing an oral history interviews so it's super focused--but like send you equipment to like, do digital things. Those are resources that

can help facilitate public space online without necessarily centering the library as the producer of all programming.

I've recently finished a work period where I basically worked through every weekend, and I was at public libraries. But now even though that's done I find them just going to sit. And I can't imagine the library without librarians. Like I'm trying to picture right now, like a self serve, like those Amazon grocery stores where you just pick things off the shelves and leave and they bill you? Like a library just can't be like that for me. I just don't know what-- It would be an airport at that point.

Kratcha: Yeah.

Yeah, wait. Okay. So you have been-- I think I know what you've been doing in public libraries, in terms of work. Like you--were you working on your thesis?

Pandza: I was working on my thesis. I was doing work work.

Kratcha: Okay.

Pandza: Yeah.

Kratcha: So you're doing like, digital oral history projects.

Pandza: Um, yeah. But I'm not necessarily going to the libraries where I'm using the collection.

Kratcha: Right.

Pandza: I just want internet and a space and I want to be around other people. And yeah, just like, be in a place that's kept nice. And I didn't realize how much I actually–

Kratcha: [Cross talk] How come?

Pandza: It's funny, because I-- when thinking about this interview, I was like, I don't know anything about libraries, but I actually spend maybe like 20% of my week in libraries. How come? Well, this is a really unpopular take in 2023. But I think that unless you have a really large home, not separating your work and living spaces can be really challenging. And so for me, I like to leave the house and put work in a separate spot.

I also like to be around other people who are also just seem focused, even if it's a leisurely focus, and they're focusing on things that have nothing to do with me. Like at the library, I snoop around I see what people are doing. There are people studying for the GMAT. There are people studying for their drivers learning permit. There are people just kind of like watching movies, but everyone's just kind of in their zone among other people. And I like that. I don't find-- at least the libraries that I go to in New York where I

live-- I don't find that a lot of them have truly social spaces. I've been going mainly to the large library at Bryant Park, the Stavros Niarchos Library across the street, and then I love checking out just some of the smaller branch libraries across the city. And they're all relatively quiet, like top to bottom. And so I don't really know why I think of libraries as a social space when I'm not really interacting too much with them as social enterprises, but like-- And I'm introverted but I like just like being around people. And I observe what's happening. Like people are really using the library spaces to convene. I don't know necessarily-- Maybe maybe even for nefarious purposes sometimes, but people are convening and I think that's cool.

TRACK 03. LIBRARIAN JUSTIN DE LA CRUZ [Hear episode on Spotify]

Justin de la Cruz: So my name is Justin de la Cruz. I work for the National Center for Data Services, which is a center in the network of the National Library of Medicine. And I'm a Program Specialist there. And what we work on is education for medical librarians on data services, which can include research data management and data science. So we develop classes, we bring people together for conversations, we develop online resources, all in the aim to get libraries educated in this area so they can do work at their institutions and feel better about the work that they do. So my background is in--basically working in technology in libraries. I've worked in public and academic and medical libraries, and mainly teach about understanding technology.

Trying to make a digital public space, while using the public library as a template is going to be very difficult. So if you think about like, in a public library, or in a space where you can choose your level of engagement, usually, you can go and see what events are happening, you can go and talk to staff members if you want to, or you can sit on your own in a cubicle or with some friends at a table. And you can kind of choose your level of engagement. Online it's a lot harder to do that without feeling obtrusive. If you think about going to a website to look up something and the chat box pops up at you, that might be helpful for you, but most of the time, I don't find it helpful. I find that kind of annoying. And I'm sure other people might find it helpful, but trying to hit that threshold of the service is there. You can see what other people are doing, you can see that staff are there helping out if you need them, and they're approachable. But finding that balance of showing that. And also thinking about if somebody's doing GMAT studies, driver's license studies, work work, thesis research, you can't put that all on the homepage of a library page or a digital public space. So what do you have on the landing page, you know, you can't have 100 or 200 items that people can choose from. That would be way too much. So design, I think was a really good point, you have to really think about that and just test some stuff out. And I think it's gonna be different from the things we've seen before. And so it's hard to imagine what that would be like.

Kratcha: Have you ever experienced a digital public space that you enjoy being in yourself?

De la Cruz: Hmm. Probably not. Okay, so um, yeah, I mean, I would say yeah. So I've done some Wikipedia editing. And I see parts of the community I like and parts that I don't like. I think that's going to be true for anything. But I think that the way they've built it and really developed it and worked it out, has been one example that's pretty good. I mean, it's sustaining itself. It definitely has its flaws, but I think the people that are into it, I mean, they're doing all the work for free. So if you consider that--that getting people to engage with the space, on a voluntary basis, I think it's going to help out a lot. And I think about that kind of thing with like, contributing to open source projects, and coding, which I haven't really done, but I thought about doing. And freely sharing educational materials and things like that. I think a lot of them are still kind of business spaces. But if I did enjoy public space, it'd be like Wikipedia, where I can choose my level of engagement. And I can choose to talk to people or not, and follow what they're doing or not. So I think has a really good system for level of engagement, deciding that, rather than getting pushed on you. So I think, to go off on a slight tangent, I think that social media is the opposite where they push engagement on you. So signing up, and then you have to follow people and then you have to do this to do that. And I think that would be a wrong method to use here. And that the other way would be more helpful to opt in pretty much for everything.

I think a public space online would have to be curated and it would have to be monitored, for lack of a better word. It would have to be regulated and tended to. Because it is a community and people are going to do stuff and offend each other as well as come together and share views and stuff like that. So there does need to be some kind of mediation process.

I flip back and forth from being an introvert and extrovert and sometimes it feels good to just kind of go around other people even if I'm not talking to them. And it feels kind of supportive, like I'm in the space. I chose to come here to work and other people are doing that too. I think that's really great. And, and also there's a chance--there's the off chance that I might see a neighbor or a friend there. And usually when I do, if I'm in a bad mood, that it kind of perks me up if I see somebody that I know. So I think there's always that kismet or chance that you could run into somebody, you know, or develop a relationship with the staff in terms of like talking to them. And I felt a lot of that as a worker in libraries that, especially in public libraries, developing personal relation-- like, like, not deeply personal, but like, recognizing patrons as they come in, I think is a part of their day that's meaningful to them. So I think that's important to consider, too.

Kratcha: Yeah, the idea of being just there, I think, is really interesting to me in a digital space. To me, the internet equivalent is being a lurker.

De la Cruz: Yeah.

Kratcha: But being a lurker in an internet space is not the same as being a lurker in a physical space. Like in a physical space, everyone can see you, and you can see them. But

if you're just lurking on like a forum--I don't know--or like, you know, a social media site, you're not there to everyone else.

De la Cruz: Yeah. I think that's a good point. Yeah, I was just gonna say something about super users in the sense that I think I read that the majority of people who read things online are lurking or not commenting. And that certain sites or communities get reputation based around a very small percentage of super users. So I was trying to make an analogy, but I don't know if it's there. But I do think there are some libraries super users or library champions, as we like to call them. But I think that's a different--I wouldn't draw that direct comparison. But yeah, I think your point is really well said that it's a different medium of engagement. So that's why I think--what I was thinking about when you said this material is that a lot of our technology is built off the last generation of technology. So we had the keyboard from the typewriter from typesetting, I guess, or whatever it was. We have the save icon on our word, because it's like a disc. And we don't use discs anymore. So the idea is that like, every time we build new technology, I mean, at least the business sense is that you have to get something that people are somewhat used to, so they don't think it's completely alien. And so the idea of the digital public space, I think, is what we're trying to do is build it off existing things. And it's just not really there yet. Because we have the public library, we have social media, and it feels like it should be a blend of that. But I don't think we know what that blend is yet. Because those are two very different-- no matter what anyone says-- those are two--they're very different things, public libraries and private business. However, I did feel--and I'm going off on a tangent, so feel free to redirect as needed. But one other thought I had in this material is that when I worked at the public library, I was in charge of a tech lab with a bunch of tablets and gadgets and things to introduce people to new technology. And our director was very focused on recreating the Apple Store experience, which I thought was really interesting in a way that I didn't think was applicable. Because they're a for profit company. They're building a brand. And we're a library, that I suppose it's also building a brand, but having different intended outcomes and audience and expectations and things like that.

Kratcha: Do you think--because as you were talking, I was like, okay, physical public libraries have their strengths. You go to different libraries for different things. Which made me think like, would it be important for a digital public library to be linked to a physical space? Or would it be better somehow to like, make digital public libraries organized around something else?

De la Cruz: Better in terms of what would be the outcome? So better for what?

Kratcha: I guess community building? Like, I can give you an example of what I'm thinking. We could have the New York Public Digital Library, or we could have the Transgender Digital Public Library.

De la Cruz: I see what you're saying. I see what you're saying. And I-- That's a great question. When we've talked about digital public library, I've thought about an all digital space with no physical location. And one reason I did was because we already have physical public libraries. They already have digital presences. They're not going to go away. Those are just gonna stay around. So when I thought about this new concept, I thought about it sort of in a vacuum of like, but on its own. And one reason I think about that is--I don't know if we talked about this, but digital access and like people's access to the internet and access on devices. And I think it would be important to try and include like mobile users, because I think there's a lot more smartphones out there than computers these days in America across the population. And trying to think about access in that sense so. Also the role of the library. I'm not sure we talked about, but I think that's kind of what your question is about, like, should it be tied to an existing institution or idea? Or should it be able to transcend boundaries or whatever. And I think that it would be really neat to develop something like your second example, where it's a specific digital platform, maybe around separate subjects, maybe you can have a series of digital public libraries. I hadn't thought about that, and I think that might be a more interesting concept. Yeah, I like that more actually. I think we should have a series of digital public libraries around different topics. And I only say that just to repeat what I said, there's physical libraries people can visit. And I think that if more people had digital access to something like that, then they would probably use it. I think some people are limited by mobility and can't make it to physical libraries. And some libraries do services around that too. But I think to try and be more concise, a series of digital public libraries on different topics would be awesome. And I think they would not need a physical representation to be successful or beneficial for their role.

TRACK 04. CODA: SIPPING THE MCLUHAN KOOL AID WITH CHRIS PANDZA [Hear the episode on Spotify]

Kratcha Voiceover: Chris and I also talked about the strengths and weaknesses of physical versus digital libraries. Here's me and Chris again.

Kratcha: So we've been talking about like, archives, and I think in my brain, I am picturing like, the physical Rare Book and Manuscript Library that exists in Columbia Libraries, which is silly, because for oral history, I mean, there are physical materials, but for the materials that you and I mostly work with, they are digital or have been digitized. So what is my question? I think my question is like, what do we gain and lose from moving between a physical archive and a digital archive? Like what's good in both spaces? And what's bad in both spaces?

Pandza: I mean, some of the digital first collections that we're producing, we actually print the interviews and store them just because I'm told that paper is the best

preservation. And I've seen some really old paper, so sure, I believe it. But what do we lose or gain? Okay, so I guess helpful content.

Kratcha: In like a user experience I mean.

Pandza: Yeah, yeah. My background, my undergraduate background, is in medium theory, which is a school of thought--I think that's most popular in Canada and Germany. It's basically this group of thinkers that really think that the medium something is presented in is consequential for the content and sometimes replaces the content entirely. So I do think--and I've drank I've had--I've sipped the Kool Aid. This is the school of thought that produced the medium is the message. Marshall McLuhan. So I think it's--I think it's a different experience. I think that I won't be able to exhaust all the ways that they could be different, but I think, right, from discoverability, to--
So there's the discoverability of the interviews themselves, if you go into a library, things are shelved, you're talking to somebody, somebody may have a point of intervention where they say, Oh, I really think you should look at this. Or maybe they say, I don't know anything about this collection. That's probably not what's gonna happen in a library.

Kratcha: That happens sometimes.

Pandza: You're sitting and reading, to find materials in a printed interview, you're skimming. So the chance that you serendipitously find something maybe is higher, though you could scroll through an interview. I think a really big thing is, when you're at the library, you're bound by time and space, you probably aren't leaving the library with the document, though you probably could. And so you're-- it's a very purposeful kind of exercise. With some of the work that I'm doing, it's designed mobile first. So-- and that's from an access perspective, like that's because for some people, that's primarily how they're accessing the Internet. It has to run on a cheap phone or it's not actually accessible. But, you know, you can listen to an interview on the train. I feel like that creates a completely different context. I say these things without value judgment. I think sometimes there's this implicit sense that like, you need to have an intense close reading in its entirety. But I don't-- I don't think that's true. I think they're just different. I think they're different experiences. What do you lose or gain though? I think that okay--the accessibility piece is huge. There was this weird twilight era where, like, personal computing devices were proliferating, and museums would create, like listening stations. So you can have a digital experience, but you're not necessarily having it in your home because you don't have the bandwidth or the storage or the equipment.

But yeah, I don't know. I just think they're different. Different experiences. And sometimes, I'm thinking about my own behaviors, like working between digital and text, or printed text. Sometimes if I really need to pay attention to something, I'll print it, and go sit somewhere else. So I think it's a different kind of reading. But that's also probably

a product of growing up in a transitional period where I was working with both. I don't know that even my younger sister, who's in her early mid 20s, would ever think to do that or will ever own a printer.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH DOULA

TRACK 05. ARTIST AND ORAL HISTORIAN TAMARA SANTIBAÑEZ [Hear the episode on Spotify]

Tamara Santibañez: My name is Tamara Santibañez. I would say that I identify as an interdisciplinary artist with oral history being a part of that practice. I am most interested, I think, and find myself using oral history as a research tool, as sort of a generative connection tool, an exploratory tool, community building tool, but also for archival purposes and preservation of story and memory and history with an eye towards underrepresented identities and narratives.

Yeah, well, a lot of my oral history work--I would say most of the oral history work that I've done for personal projects, and personal initiative is around topics and practices that I hold really close personally. So specifically, the most, I will say that over the past couple of years has been around tattooing--both around tattooing and the prison industrial complex and differing intersections of those but also around queer and trans elders in tattooing and trying to preserve those stories.

Kratcha: When you think about, just like what you know, about what libraries are, do you kind of understand them as places or, I guess, like sets of people who think about power and safety? Or is your sort of like, ideal library based on something else, like some other experience?

Santibañez: Well when I think about librarians that I know, as individuals, they're deeply concerned with those issues. I think that they're always thinking about resources and the public and democratizing access and even the unseen work of librarianship, you know. I think about the ways that those exist in public space and cities and can often be a sort of refuge, like not just of information, but of a space, like a place to sit, a place to use the bathroom, a place to use the water fountain, a place to print your resume. So I think that librarians are incredibly attuned to those things. And I think that they bring a really well rounded care to not only the like information and the creative works and the historical works that they're stewarding, but the people who are in the space and the people who are encountering it.

And that's always been my experience, you know, when I've worked with librarians--that they're very thrilled and excited to share information and to help enable that access. And that they're also really aware of the ways that that access can be denied.

Kratcha: Is that impression based on like, your experience in trying to archive your work?

Santibañez: No, I would say it's based on more social relationships with librarians. And so that sample is skewed for sure, because it's so many people I know who were punks that made zines and now work in libraries and still make zines or you know, people who are very lapsed leftists, I guess, that's the easiest way to say it.

But yeah, I will say when it comes to interfacing with-- to me, there's a great distance between these, you know, really radical, cool librarians that I know personally, and library access in a more abstract sense. Like when I think about reaching out to an archive to try to find something in their collection, that feels much further away to me than the librarians that I know personally, which, you know, makes sense, of course. But it's hard to imagine the people who have those same values and those same ways of working in libraries as the people who I know when they're not in my immediate orbit, and so that's something I find myself being very intimidated by, when I don't quite have a clear idea of what I'm looking for.

I think I just struggle with-- I think I get easily overwhelmed with digital access and with sheer volume. So the person to person aspect is very supportive for me, if I know that I can email somebody, or call somebody or walk in somewhere and just ask a person and say, hey, this is my question, or this is what I need help with. Can you help me? And usually, that's with pretty positive results. But I think what I'm also worried about there is that I'm missing some sort of crucial part of the experience, right? Like when I think about my home library, my own personal library, I'm familiar with the connections that exist there. And so there's, you know-- I often find myself reading something stopping, finding another book that relates to the things that I was reading that I want to have on hand as I take in this new information. And there's all these connections and sort of a web that can be woven between what's there. And so with a library that is new to me, I fear that I lose out on that process. And I think maybe that's what I-- what I wonder, or what I feel short changed about is what would that process look like-- that exploratory process where I could more easily connect to other things there? And I know that this comes up in oral history all the time because when we're working with metadata or tags or what have you, or keywords, sometimes you're just having to listen to full oral histories to know what's in that. And there's not necessarily a way to know or to find, you know, okay, I want-- I mean, something that I do, a habit that I have is that anytime I'm in a search engine, I just type in "tattoo" and see what comes up.

Kratcha: Oh, interesting.

Santibañez: Yeah, pretty much anytime I'm in a library or like an academic, like, you know, article archive or something, I'll just be like, what's here about tattooing? I'm always curious. And sometimes that just has really mixed results, or really misleading results. I come across a lot of red herrings.

I went into a bookstore the other day. I was trying to get a book as a thank you gift for a friend. And I have never really just asked a bookstore clerk for a general recommendation. I've always gone in looking for a specific title or something about a specific subject and just guided myself or asked, "Do you have this--yes or no?" And I was able to say, hey, could you recommend something for me? I'm looking for fiction, a novel, maybe some kind of queer or trans narrative--do you have any new releases that are something along those lines? And they were able to recommend like three or four things. And one of them, they were like, everyone in the bookstore just read this. Everyone's really excited about this title. And I got it, and it was great. But that process is so personal, and it was really fun and really satisfying, right? Because I was able to bring that person a sort of broad few prompts, and then hear how they related to it or what they took from that. And I feel like that's a process that would be really exciting to me in a library.

Kratcha: What do you think would facilitate that kind of process in a library?

Santibañez: Mmm.

Kratcha: Like that you would actually want to engage with?

Santibañez: Yeah, I think just talking to a person. I think maybe like having some sort of readily accessible like, research-- research doula in the library. You know, if I was able to show up and be like, this is my idea. This is what I'm curious about. Where should I start? Where can I go from there? I think that's something that I would really love.

TRACK 06. LIBRARIAN SHEILA GARCÍA MAZARI [Hear the episode on Spotify]
García Mazari: So my name is Sheila García Mazari. Pronouns are she/her. I work as the Online Learning Librarian at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I'm fairly new to this role. It's coming up to a year. I spent about 10 years in libraries standing out in public libraries, and then moving to academic, primarily in like instructional liaison roles.

Kratcha: Okay, I want to back up like one more step and ask like, what is a doula?

García Mazari: Doula. Yes. So a doula, the way I understand it, is someone that advocates for the needs of a patient, particularly in childbirth. So the doula is there, kind of similar to a midwife. And is there, listens to what the patient needs. And the idea is that when someone is in childbirth, they are in a lot of pain, and are not fully centered in terms of the decisions that they're making. They're being asked to make these decisions. Like, you know, we're gonna do a C section, is that okay with you? And this person is in a lot of pain and in active labor. And if they didn't want a C section, the doula is there to say she doesn't want this and can, in turn--doulas focus on the needs of the patient. Like, what did the patients say they wanted before they were in this really painful, active

labor sort of place? And so it's more of an advocacy role is the way I see that research doula--the doula, in general.

Kratcha: Yeah. Yeah. So okay, that I think that aligns with my understanding of a doula too. Do you think there would be an advocacy aspect to a research doula?

García Mazari: I think so. I think that-- well, I talked a lot about journal articles, and the amount of journal articles out there, but just in general, there's a lot of information out there. Newspaper articles, blogs, Twitter, that's now X. You know, like social media. And when you do library research in an academic library, you're just being directed toward, journal articles or books, but you're not really directed toward more expansive things, like special collections or oral histories or even just networking, of like, let me tell you, this one person that knows a lot about this thing and you could talk to them. And so I think that there is a place for librarians to be a doula where they like, have that deep subject knowledge where they're like, and this person wrote a whole book on this. And I know them, and you can connect them.

Kratcha: Yeah. What do you think it would take to make it so that that could be your job?

García Mazari: So that you could be a research doula?

Kratcha: Yeah.

García Mazari: I think funding. I think a big one would be funding. There should be enough for the-- I think that the amount of careers available has expanded. And I think a lot of universities are expanding what they offer in order to attract more students. But I also don't think they're necessarily investing in the information infrastructure that they need. I think there's this idea that, like, the information is just there. And as long as the information is just there, the students can find it, and it's fine. But that's not necessarily true. Students can't find a lot of things. And where I am, I think that by and large, people are spread thin a lot. And they want to help. And it takes more time than maybe others think it does to answer a research question, because, as I said, we have to do research too when someone comes in with a question and be like, where is that again? And then direct them to it. So it's less of oh, yeah, I know this off the top of my head and more like, let me see where that is located. And then let me direct you to what you're looking for.

Kratcha: Yeah.

García Mazari: Yeah. And then for me, like I'm an online librarian. And so my job is to create online asynchronous content, to help guide students on how to use the library. But also largely to think about the big questions around bias and what it means to be a

scholar, and how you can claim that identity even if you haven't published a journal article. You know, as I spent the last year, I did a listening tour with students and I listened to what students needed. And I think that in order to make up for the lack of people that are employed there, they create these online asynchronous contests that students can just view it on their own. And that way, you're not spread so thin, you know, talking to each individual class, or doing live classes at all. Because they can easily get to be a lot. And this way, they can do it on their own time. But there's a lot that's lost in that. Which is why I'm like, it's very difficult to think of technology and digital being the end all solution to everything. What I realized in my role is that online, asynchronous by itself isn't going to work for a lot of students. The students need some sort of method of engaging beyond interactive to know that there's someone out there that's helping, that's like a direct line to me, so that I can directly answer their questions. It can't just sit there on its own. And that, in turn, means that it's a lot of work for me, right? And every time I bring it up, the thing is like, well, you want to make sure your work is sustainable. Yes. And that means that maybe there could be more than one person hired doing this. You know, because I work for a Hispanic Serving Institution. I also work for an Asian Pacific Islander Serving Institution. It has both designations. And a lot of students that come from those backgrounds come from very collectivist backgrounds, where you support each other and you learn from each other. And online strips that away. It becomes--I'm learning by myself with a computer. So as much as I want to think of the future as more digital, sometimes I'm thinking it might be less digital. And we'd be moving back more to that human connection, that analog. Even though it's hard to keep up with all of that research.

I think research could be just creating. I think there's this idea that research is finding, quote unquote, new information and packaging it for academia. But I think that research is generally creating. There was something that I was listening to recently. It was a podcast, but I forget what the name of it was. But someone said something really powerful. In which they said, for a lot of historically marginalized communities, they don't feel like they're part of the scholarly conversation. But it's like, they literally are doing research on your community, where you're actually living, what it's like to be in that community. And so the fact that your personal experience is often not considered research, is considered a bias, doesn't make sense if they're researching your community. I think that's particularly true for indigenous populations. And so that's-- When I think about the scholarly conversation, I think of it as like expanding beyond that.

We just kind of talk about scholarly communication and equity and inclusion. And I was like, there tends to be this-- We watched a webinar in which someone said, it's not up to the publishers to change the way that we publish and decide, you know, value. It's up to the scholarly community to do it. And I was like, it's kind of up to both, because the publishers make money off of this. And the scholarly community attracts more scholars. And it's all really just wrapped up in capitalism. Universities may be nonprofit,

but they're always worried about how many people they have enrolled. And, you know, showing their brand value in that way.

I actually attended a webinar all about brand value, and how you can hire a consultant to help your brand because it's the future for universities, universities are building brands, right. And they have slogans. And it's not just the mascots. It's been for years coming, but it's like, now it's even more important, because a lot of universities, they don't have enough local students, and they're reaching out internationally to try to get more international students. And so brand is very important. It's basically being run like a corporation, like a for-profit corporation in that way. And journal articles are exactly the same way-- they want more subscribers, they want more sales, and at the end of the day, that's what it is.

So if we could somehow take the capitalism out of research, I think it would be great, because I learned so much from zines. I learned so much from spoken oral storytelling. I don't think it needs to be tangible. Right. And I think that's the other thing, is that a lot of times when people think about research, it's like an article or a published thing, and it doesn't have to be a tangible thing. A lot of--like, my community was oral storytelling. And now all those stories are just here, because they're not written down. And so, that's okay. Like it doesn't have to be written down. Like I think that's the thing is that, there's just this need of like, all knowledge must be written down, must be available in a written format. And it's like, it's okay, if some stories are lost with time. And maybe that's just the way things are meant to be. So like trying to take away this capitalist slant, this slant of like, it needs to be preserved forever. It's okay sometimes if things break away and fall away, because that's just embracing how time works. So when I think of a scholarly conversation, that is my ideal. Just letting things sit and honoring how things were created in the format that were created by the creator and being okay with that and saying that's still a scholarly item. That's still part of a scholarly conversation.

TRACK 07. CODA: THINGS THAT DON'T QUITE FIT INTO ANY OF YOUR PURPOSES WITH TAMARA SANTIBAÑEZ [Hear the episode on Spotify]

Kratcha Voiceover: Before we move on to the next oral historian, I want to share a bit more tape from my conversation with Tamara. I didn't play this for Sheila before we talked, and yet I hear resonances between what I talked about with Tamara and what Sheila had to say about respecting the ephemeral nature of some research creations. Here's that bit of my conversation with Tamara in which we talk about the parts of oral history interviews that inevitably don't fit into a research agenda, whether everything from a recording needs to be archived or "used," and how we would both rather go on tangents than stick to a strict research question. I hope you enjoy this exchange as much as I do.

Santibañez: Yeah, I was actually talking with somebody yesterday, who is an artist who works quite a lot around like, you know, carceral systems and surveillance and Blackness.

And we-- And I was saying that something that I really value about oral history is that I'm trying to encourage people to do more with specific prompts in an interview is that oftentimes people show up in their storytelling who serve a really sort of like past referential role in their life. And the way that they talk about them, is almost kind of speaking that person into documentation. And it doesn't always have to do with the crux of the story, or like sort of the thrust of their life history. But I've heard people bring it up often in the way of oh, this person served a really formative purpose in my life at this time, and I don't know where they are today. I've lost track of them. We're no longer in touch, and I often wonder where they are. Or this person passed away, and I think of them and I hold on to this memory. And there's something so special to me about oral history providing a space to memorialize that or to document that where it might otherwise be lost. And where the storyteller or the narrator might not actually have a lot to offer towards documenting it. And I think that that happens a lot with like, you know, in queer, queer lives and also in lives that are touched by incarceration, where sometimes you do only know somebody through like an alias, or sometimes you did only know somebody when you were like, in a cell with them, and then you both got transferred to a different unit. Or, you know, maybe you were like in juvie with this person when you were both 16 and you never saw one another again. But yeah, I think oral history provides a really special occasion to hold on to that and to tell someone else about it in a way that's on the record. That seems to-- it seems to really encourage it naturally. Like I've noticed it coming up a lot in ways that I didn't prompt but I'm trying to consciously prompt more.

Kratcha: I'm trying to--I have a question and I'm trying to formulate it in a way that isn't like, glib. I'll just ask it. What's the research value of that? Of like capturing that-- Yeah, I guess. Go ahead.

Santibañez: No, you go ahead.

Kratcha: Like, I'm using research as a shorthand. What is the knowledge value of that?

Santibañez: Yeah, cuz I was gonna say, I don't know that there is or has to be a research value. The knowledge value. I mean, I think it's a connection value. I think it's a therapeutic value. I think it would mean something to that person to speak that into-- Speak that into the record, whether or not it was ever heard by another person beyond that. And it's something that when I think about knowledge production, you know, not that I ever want to like, parcel out history. But you know, when you're trying to edit something or produce something around a particular subject or theme, there are these things that don't quite fit into any of your purposes. And those things really take up a lot of space in my mind because I wonder where they can go or if they should go anywhere. And maybe end up asking myself the same question that you just asked. Because, yeah, there are moments in the story that I'm like that actually-- that really didn't have

anything to do with this interview, or the question that I asked or where this might be going, or the purpose that we set out to achieve together. But it's so important. It feels so important. And I'm so grateful to have received it. Does it need to go somewhere else? What does it mean for it to live on my laptop or to hover in the space of the time that we talked to one another and maybe not go any further? Yeah, that's-- those are questions I find myself asking a lot in oral history work.

Kratcha: Yeah. Yeah, it strikes me that it is very different from how I often teach, you know, research and searching, which is to stay focused. In order to save yourself time. And the way I usually present this information is to say, listen, I'm really bad at this. I love to go on a tangent. And it means I never finished my project. So you know, you, students, should stay focused and focus on your research question. But I don't actually like to do that.

Santibañez: No, I don't like to do that either. Yeah, my ex partner used to call it being brain hype. When they would come over, and I would just have like, twelve books out because like, one book had reminded me of another book. And like, one book was bookmarking the other book. And then I had to like pull up a Google search, because it reminded me of something else. And I find that process so fun. It's-- I don't know that it produces anything.

But I've been asking myself a lot. I mean, I think as a lot of like interdisciplinary cultural workers do, like what is my purpose? If I had to synthesize what my work is or what my approach is or what my perspective is? And I tend to just come back to again and again, that it's to be able to draw these sometimes like disparate seeming connections between things. And to point to the ways that culture is interconnected, in ways that we might not recognize. And so it feels valuable and generative in that way, even if I'm not focused on a central research question. But sometimes it comes back around to a central point. Whether it's a point about like-- I don't know about wielding power in workplaces or a point about it. If interpersonal conflict resolution or something and you had to read, you had to like, consume five different types of media to come around to that point, eventually. I think it's something I find myself doing more often than not. And I don't know that there's a linear way for me to arrive.

Kratcha: Yeah.

CHAPTER 3. COSMIC [YOU], COSMIC LIBRARY

TRACK 08. ORAL HISTORIAN BENJI DE LA PIEDRA [Hear the episode on Spotify]
De la Piedra: My name is Benji de la Piedra. I am 30 years old. Born and raised in Northern Virginia, Washington DC. I'm in DC now. I'm a visiting fellow at a scholar Center at the Library of Congress, at the John W. Kluge Center for Scholars.

My work straddles practical hands-on interviewing oral history work. And out of that, kind of a further leg of that, is teaching oral history and interviewing skills in different kinds of settings, from semester-long graduate level seminars to one off or a three session community workshop. For instance, the DC Oral History Collaborative, which is actually funded by and all the workshops take place at branches of the DC Public Library.

Also, I do a lot of basically scholarly work. Historical documentation and like literary theorizing. Most of my scholarly work is biographical or kind of takes biographical-- like it coalesces around biographies or radiates out of specific intellectual biographies. So, three African American intellectuals in particular tend to guide everything I do and push everything I do. And they are Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Herbert Denton Jr. Denton is the least known of those three. He was a journalist at the Washington Post, and I've been researching his biography through both oral history methods and more traditional archival documentary, library-based kind of methods for the past eight years.

I frame Herb Denton in cosmic terms, and we can talk about what that means. What is cosmic? Because that could also mean nothing, but I do think that there's something I mean by that. So the idea of like Herbert Denton's cosmos is what I'm interested in documenting and interpreting as his biographer.

Kratcha: I have a few questions, which maybe will seem off topic, but I don't think they are. But I want to know more about the cosmos.

De la Piedra: Yeah. Yeah. So okay, yeah, I'm glad you asked. So, Albert Murray, one of my three guys. He has this idea, basically, of what he calls Cosmos Murray. So he's basically talking about how as-- not even just as a Black intellectual, but just as like a person in the world. He was raised to believe that you really could be like, an heir--with an H: H E I R--like heir to like, all of the world's culture ever. And that what it takes to like, absorb that culture is like, all the qualities of a good student. And basically cosmos-- and he literally in this essay, he says like, the term is like "cosmos," and then in brackets, the word "you." Right, like cosmos-- like who is Cosmos Kae? Like Cosmos Kae is the entire world of connections and contexts and like all of the different worlds, universes, you could say, that a single life fits into. And so yeah, Murray has this idea-- And I think it's especially potent when we're talking about Black intellectuals or people from, I guess, you can call like subaltern communities-- like this idea that minority identity or subaltern identity is not a limitation on the access that that person can have towards culture of any kind.

I also--when I talk about cosmic--I'm also-- I am getting it from my partner, Christine, for 10 years was a mathematics teacher, like a middle school math teacher, and she is trained in Montessori style education specifically for adolescents, which is unusual. Most Montessorians are elementary school teachers, and that's because Dr. Montessori died before she could write her book on adolescent education. But

Montessori, her whole philosophy of education is what she calls cosmic education--that the purpose of education is to allow the learner to discover what Montessori calls their cosmic task. Like to discover that task, like that sense of a life's purpose, and then to have the tools and develop the capacity to carry out that cosmic task.

Yeah, and even the word I mean, the word cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism is something I've been into for a long time. Again, this idea that like, you know, as human beings we exist to like, be exposed to as much culture as we can, and that we shouldn't draw stark boundaries around the kind of culture that we should try to learn from just because of what is expected of us because of a stereotype or what's familiar or something. So yeah, that idea of like a really-- I don't know if limitless is the right word, but maybe-- kind of like a limitless universe of what there is to learn and what there is to-- And I know this word is obviously very politically charged these days, but I mean this in a very positive sense like--to appropriate. Like, what is what one can make one's own?

Yeah, what is a cosmic library? It would be a repository and catalyst of knowledge. Or like a repository of knowledge and a catalyst of appropriations of knowledge that is sufficiently vast to, like equip the learner to take their own cosmic journeys, right? And the idea of the journey is also super important, I think, in cosmic-- like, it's-- you're heading out into, like, the unknown. And so, yeah, that idea that this knowledge can give you what you need to travel great distances, something like that. I'm sure there's way better to put this, but that's what's coming to mind for now at least is that.

Kratcha: Yeah. Yeah. Um, have you ever encountered a library like that in real life?

De la Piedra: I mean, the Library of Congress is kind of-- it's, I would say, the closest I've ever come to experiencing that. It's funny, because I'm also thinking about, like, the role that aesthetics play, like, if you go into the main reading into the Library of Congress, it's stunning. Like, I love being in that room, right? And it's funny, actually, because I was just in there yesterday, and you look up, like when you go in, and you look all the way up. And you know, cathedrals do the same, they have the same effect. You know, like big mosques, the same. It's like that, literally, the space like, has an effect on you. And so you look up, and the Library of Congress Main Reading Room, there's this, mosaic that has basically like the 12 cultures, which are probably seen as like the 12 greatest cultures or whatever, each represented. Like 10 of those 12 are European cultures. And then there's like, Islam is in there, and no one else. But like 10, or 11. It's like France, Rome, Spain, you know. It's like, the Europe and then like, the East, as Islam. So yeah. Is that representative? Of course not. Does it reflect what was seen as like, the known world that was like worth knowing for those people? Like, yes. And even as contaminated as that idea might be here, and as limited as it is-- Again, I think there is something to that impulse to say like, let's think beyond our culture. I don't know, I could say that in a better way, I think. But anyways, that's kind of what's coming to mind.

So yeah, I mean, the Library of Congress has two copies of every book, like ever, pretty much. You know, maybe not published around the world, but certainly published in the US. I would say, for the most part, anything from like the Western world, you can get at the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress has the largest collection of maps in the world, 5.6 million maps. You know what I mean? Just like the amount of material is pretty astounding. So again this idea of like, access. And it's funny, because like, as I'm talking about this, like, I can't help but--For some reason, I'm thinking about the early promise of the internet was like, Oh, we're gonna have this unfettered access to all this knowledge and to be great. And that's like, all we're going to need, right? And, obviously, the internet-- We can pose serious questions as to whether it's done more harm than good. But again, I think there's something about that dream of having like access to and kind of, like instant recall.

Kratcha: Do you think there's a difference between access to knowledge and, like, [a] catalyst? For knowledge appropriation?

De la Piedra: Yeah, I think-- catalyst-- Yeah, I do. Because think with the access-- to me access is like-- access is like the name for a situation in which like, if you know to go look for it, like you can find it, right? I have access to more material than I can ever count or know what to do with at the Library Congress because of the catalog, right? Is the catalog, like the most intuitive and kind of easiest thing to use? No. So as a catalyst, it might be falling short, right? At least for me, right? I don't want to piss anybody off us by saying this. I love the Library of Congress.

Kratcha: I don’t think you will.

De la Piedra: But I hate-- I'm not great at navigating databases. And so I think--and I think about this in the same way actually with oral history. There was a time when like my big idea-- kind of the thing I kept, like repeating in conferences and stuff was that oral historians-- fundamentally what we do is build collections of interviews. And that part of building a collection is building pathways into the collection. And pathways out of the collection--like how to get that material into like other streams of culture and in the hands of other people. And so, yeah, to me, it's like the access is like the collection itself. And then the catalyst would be kind of the different mechanisms and avenues that you create to like give people the opportunity to really engage with it and appropriate it and make it their own.

TRACK 09. LIBRARIAN SEAN KNOWLTON [Hear the episode on Spotify]

Knowlton: My name is Sean Knowlton. I'm the Librarian for Digital Scholarship here at Tulane University. I'm 51 years old. I've been a librarian for 20 plus years, and I currently head a department called Digital Scholarship and Initiatives, which oversees the Digital

Library and other digital initiatives-- thesis and dissertations archive, an online journals platform, an online exhibits platform. And in my capacity as digital scholarship librarian, I work with faculty and students to support their digital interests, whether they want to create exhibits, make timelines, do digital text analysis. And so I will do consultations, workshops, and library instruction sessions. And as head of this department, I support the folks who really are hands on with the digital libraries.

I've been a librarian for a long time. And during that time, I started out as a research instructional librarian, a reference librarian at a service desk with real reference books behind the scenes and answering questions. And became a Latin Americanist librarian. So collection development, liaison work with Spanish and Portuguese departments, Latin American Studies, and I did that for quite a while at Colorado, here at Tulane, and then at Columbia University. And back here at Tulane, in my most recent incarnation, I came back to be a generalist, a humanities librarian with a collection duties with art, architecture, philosophy, and a few other areas over time and eventually found my way into the digital scholarship realm. And then up to a supervisor position.

Kratcha: As you were listening, and maybe also, as you were, you know, reading Wikipedia, and whatever you were reading, were you finding connections to library work?

Knowlton: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. So, he [Benji] is looking at, you know-- sometimes people think like, Oh, why are you studying that? That was 100 years ago, 200 years ago? Why don't you look at something new? And you still have the ability to look at something old and gain new information from it, because you benefit from distance, from time from, a new perspective, or now you have technology to ask questions you couldn't ask before. So and that's what the digital libraries, what Wikipedia and other democratized access information sources are available to do. We can ask new questions of old material. You get new understanding, new perspectives. And I think about, say, the Tulane University's digital library. So Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans and Louisiana has a very certain history, with slavery, with inequality, mostly based on race. And our collections reflect the history of the city. So we have Civil War letters, we have plantation records, records of papers of famous men, mostly, well known men in society, ledgers of plantations. These are not things that we necessarily want to digitize now. We want to tell other stories. But these things exist. And we can tell new stories with those that maybe wasn't intended before. So that ledger will allow you to understand how people were oppressed and their labor was exploited. Whereas back in the day, the ledger just kept the business and made it legal, but also his way to kind of show off of like, Hey, this is how I became rich and famous. But now we can tell different stories by asking different questions of it.

Kratcha: I hear you talking a lot about storytelling, which I think really resonates with oral history as a practice. And also like, kind of funny, because I don't think Benji

explicitly talked about storytelling at all. But I think he's talking about it sort of implicitly. Could you tell me more about why storytelling is kind of a cosmic practice in libraries?

Knowlton: Oh, yeah. Yeah. So digital libraries are fairly stale. They're just like a collection of objects put together. Maybe there's a paragraph that describes a collection, and there's metadata associated with each thing, but it's presented in a very sterile environment. And so we have a say, a wonderful image, which shows humanity and then we have things like creation date, title, subjects--African Americans, playgrounds. You know, useful words, but not really telling the story. We don't know necessarily about the photographer, we have to figure out like, who took this picture, who are the people in it, what's the story behind it? And maybe there's some description there. It's just the raw material. I see the items in a digital library as like raw material for something else. And as digital scholarship librarian, I offer workshops on digital storytelling because that's where the fun is, where a timeline to talk about a concept over time using images and texts, or to create a story map like an ArcGIS story map or a Knight Lab story map, where you use multimedia and text to tell the story. Or our online exhibits platform, which on WordPress where, you know-- Each form-- and then the format of what tool you're using, you're going to tell a different story based on what's available to you. This one is great with images, this one's great with texts, and so forth. And so that's where I think least in the assignments that come alive-- and I've seen some really great exhibits, where people are interested in telling stories with things that are from a digital library collection or just from elsewhere. And that's where the real excitement is, everything else is just-- it's great. It's preserved. It's described. It's discoverable. It's accessible. We've made transcripts, we've made them 99% accurate through human editing so it meets accessibility standards. But it doesn't mean anything until people ask questions of it and interrogate that information and take two things and put them together and tell something new. And yeah, so the storytelling part is I think the real, the real work. I mean, it's all part of the real work. So someone takes the items and they create that scholarly record, we either digitize it, or we take the born digital content, we give it some context, and we preserve it. And then and then now new things can happen with it.

Kratcha: Yeah, yeah, it's kind of-- I'm scrolling down on Benji's transcript, because you're kind of describing what he describes-- the pathways. Pathways in and out of collections. You mentioned a hypothetical user earlier that I immediately fell in love with, which is the user who is searching for information about, you know, old Mardi Gras costumes to design their new Mardi Gras costume. What --in an ideal world, what would that person experience, assuming they had no affiliation with the university? They're just, you know, getting ready for Mardi Gras? How could they have a great cosmic library experience through digital libraries?

Knowlton: Yeah, so this happened. I mean, this happens plenty. There's plenty folks-- Those images are shared widely. They're really cool. So basically, these are drawings of

floats and costumes from like the 1890s. And there's 1000s of these. I think there's over 5000 images that have been digitized. And they are very inspirational, like, look at this great costume, this person's dressed up as a grasshopper. Some of them are, you know, maybe not as racially, or culturally sensitive as they could be now, but there's lots of great inspiration there. People are always looking for costumes. They're always looking for ideas. It is definitely the most popular collection that we have. And because it's fun, it's exciting. It doesn't-- it can have an educational mission, but also you can have just a really fun mission. The images are beautiful, the colors are wonderful. I think that's what makes that one definitely so successful. And people discover those, like, I'll be on Reddit and people were talking about New Orleans and talking about Mardi Gras, and they're like, check out these costumes, and they link to the Digital Library. That never happens for regular collections for the most part.

Kratcha: Do you think it's the collection itself? Or is there something about the way that collection is presented that makes it shareable?

Knowlton: I think you don't even need any metadata. Most folks aren't like, Oh, this is Morpheus or Orpheus or whatever crew it is, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter when it was. We have all that metadata that describes it-- that this is float 12, and the theme of this float is grasshopper's delight, whatever it might be. They just see a really cool-- wow, that person is dressed up as a cockroach. That is really cool. How did they-- I could do that. Or it's just exciting and inspirational. They see themes that are still present in costuming, and it's just exciting when they think about, say, Mardi Gras. And so you can just take an image by itself and not have any context with it and interact with it. I think that's what makes those images so exciting. You don't know who made them or why or what they're really for, but they're just fantastical images.

Kratcha: How do you feel about that? That you can look at them without any context?

Knowlton: I think that's great. I mean, you know, because we've controlled for so long what's important and why it's important in the academic world, and there's a lot of things-- I personally don't think like, oh, that's not scholarship necessarily. But you can you can study anything in a scholarly way. And you-- It doesn't necessarily have to be scholarly, you know? The idea of creation. I really liked the idea that someone can take something and see something totally different than I do with it and create something new, whether it inspires a restaurant design or a new way of thinking or revitalizes an antiquated term. Yeah, I think as a librarian, my most exciting moments, as a reference librarian, have been working with those folks who come in and are excited about doing something and not just searching for, Well, I'm writing a paper on X topic, and I need five sources. These are folks who are like, this is really exciting to me, and I'm going to do something totally new and creative with it. That yeah, that's what I find the most out there. The artist type creation or just seeing things in a new light.

TRACK 10. CODA: CHARLIE AND THE AI CAT WITH SHEILA GARCÍA MAZARI [Hear the episode on Spotify]

Kratcha Voiceover: Although Sheila, who you heard earlier talking about what it would be like to be a research doula, hasn't heard anything about Benji's cosmic libraries, she did speculate with me about a piece of technology that could make her work more research doula-like. I think this piece of speculative library tech would also facilitate a more cosmic library experience for both library workers and library users. So, without further ado, here's Sheila again, this time talking about Charlie the AI Cat.

Kratcha: If you could have your job be anything, and the experience of your job be anything and the technology be anything, what would you want? You know, how would you spend your week? And like, how would you interact with students and technology?

García Mazari: I think that-- Well, I really, really like teaching. And what I would love to do, and I know, it's totally impossible, because there's kind of like this surveillance thing part of it too, you know, but as the students are researching, and you're seeing that they're struggling, you can just jump in, like, hey, so you're struggling, do you need any help? Feel free to click right here. And then if they click, it's like, I'm right there, connected, and being able to help them right when they're struggling or need the help right then and there. The more that students are able to connect with me online, I feel like the better. And currently, that's not really the case. If my job could have no committee work, you know, if my job could have none of this extra work that comes with working in academia, it would make it a lot easier to like, you know, connect.

And then the other part of it also is like, you have to stay on top of your own fields. So then there's a professional development part of it too, that you have to be part of, and that takes away from the main focus of being able to help the student and what they need. I think, this idea in a way that if you're not answering questions all the time, that means you're open, you're free to do these other things. But what you can be doing in that free time is actually seeing what's in the catalog and being aware of what's available. And I think we've kind of lost that over time. And it's more about production versus knowledge.

Kratcha: Okay, can you walk me through your day, you wake up, and then what happens?

García Mazari: I wake up. I am online. So I think I would stay online. I have a chronic illness that makes it harder to be in person. And so I've pretty much decided that this is what works best for me. And so I get on. I power on my computer. And then I start by looking to see if there were any questions that came in overnight while I was sleeping that I can answer right away. I might have my assistant, Charlie, with me. And Charlie-- I would be like, Charlie, I don't know anything about the subject, what can we find about

the subject, and Charlie would go and be like, this is what we found. This is what's being, you know, reviewed recently. And then that would give me the starting point to do a deep dive for the student and help us to get the student through that.

And then I might have a few classes, programs where I'm like, I know that these people are doing live classes, maybe I can, you know, Zoom into the class, or in some other way, digitally, be part of the class. Ideally, the class would be set up for this because sometimes the classrooms are not set up for a hybrid environment. And then there there would be a time in my day in which I'm just monitoring and seeing questions that have come like, hey, I'm struggling right now actively right now I'm on the search, I need help and then connecting and being able to see a student's screen and being able to help them through it. That seems like it would be really helpful for students. It also gives me pause because it's very invasive. And I think that's where it's like, oh, I can see your screen right away, right. But it's like, no, I should be able to ask, can I see your screen? And so I think there would be those those protocols in place. Like do you want me to connect with you? Can I see your screen? All of these things, to ask permission as we go. And also, if they don't want to share their screen, if they don't want to connect at this moment, being able to be like, okay, so I'm going to send something that might be helpful, even though you don't want to connect but you said you needed help. I'm going to send something, you know, asynchronously that might be helpful. So having those multimodal tools available. That's what I'm thinking of would be an ideal day for me.

Kratcha: I want to know more about Charlie.

García Mazari: Charlie just popped into my mind. Charlie is like Siri, but isn't concerned with where I'm going. And whether I took the right exit. Charlie is just concerned about knowing what is available and actually being responsive to that availability. Charlie is conceived when we have very robust metadata for all of our articles and they're well filed. And so Charlie--so it makes Charlie's job a lot easier. And Charlie can pull what they need. Charlie's essentially the search catalog that we all want to have. But we don't. Because it has all of the information it needs to do deep dives into topics and pull relevant things like it's not pulling you all of these, like semi irrelevant things. It's only pulling relevant things. And it's very effective. I don't know, superhuman.

Kratcha: Is Charlie just your assistant? Or is every librarian in your system using Charlie or do they have their own?

García Mazari: I mean, yeah, Charlie would be my assistant. Because Charlie would need to learn my voice, would need to learn my rhythms. And you know, like, acclimate to the way I work. But maybe, maybe the AIs talk to each other. So that way they can all have like, even deeper subject expertise.

Kratcha: Yeah. I'm picturing like, from--what is that series? The His Dark Materials series? Like the person and their daemon?
García Mazari: Oh, yes. To that, yes. And I can be away from Charlie and Charlie will be fine. I actually-- I was thinking about a cat that knew everything. You know, like, that's always there, but can actually help me.

And I'm wondering if Charlie ever powers down. I feel like Charlie would be always awake. Because like, we need to sleep. But Charlie doesn't need to sleep. They will be awake and taking in questions and just keeping them on the docket and be like, good morning, Sheila. Yeah, these questions came in overnight. This is some research I did if it's helpful to get you started, kind of thing. Yeah. And I think it's less about cutting corners. It's more about making the workload manageable in that way, but also being able to connect with people. That's what I don't want to lose.

Kratcha: Yeah, I noticed that you said that, you know, you would have this sort of like AI assistant, but also you would have more colleagues?

García Mazari: Yes. I would have work colleagues, because I don't know, I think at the end of the day, it's still like, as much as the AI system can be helpful. One person can't do it all. And if you want a human connection, that person has to rest. That person has, like you said, to go to the restroom, etc. And questions will come in. And I do think that there is kind of like, this idea that the response should be fairly quick. And I think that's just how technology works now, where people don't--can't really wait three days for you to email them back. They kind of want to respond as quickly as possible. Kind of reminds me of when I was in the public library, sometimes we would get mail from people still, because they were used to mailing a question. And so we will mail them back. Or they would call us and we wouldn't be able to find an answer. But can we give you a call back? And they'd be like, yes. But then when you work in academic libraries, it feels like it's like, no, I need this now. Like this, I need it now. There's definitely a generational difference in terms of how quickly you expect the information to come back to you. And yeah, so I just think about it. Like, as much as I have the AI the person still can only work so fast.

Kratcha: This is a really like big and vague question. But what do you think that the society looks like where Charlie the AI cat and the research doula role exist? What is that society like?

García Mazari: I love the AI cat. So I work at a campus that has really bad issues with housing for students. And housing is very expensive. And students continually struggle with it. So in my mind, students would be able to live wherever the hell they want, you know, somewhere that is possible for them to live in. And that way, they could still connect with people in some way.

At the same time, because you have Charlie, and you have librarians being able to join you digitally, these empty offices could be more living spaces for students that want to be there in person and engage with people versus, you know, calling people back. It's like, we can convert these into living spaces for students so that it can be more manageable for them.

So I can see it as like a society in which a student can choose one of two tracks. They can choose to do their degree, mostly online or some sort of hybrid component or they can choose to do it in person, and go with the folks that still work in person, the research doulas that are still there present, because I think you can still have both. So I do think the future is hybrid. I think that's how we should move forward. I'm not sure that that's how most universities are moving forward though.

I mean, the other thing I thought about is that I think this hybrid approach also would make it helpful for international students. Not just students that wanted to study in the US, but US students that want to study elsewhere. Because I think there's more and more of US students that are like, I would love to study at a university in Europe, and tapping into the knowledge that's there. Or the other thing I'm thinking about is just expanding their horizons in that way too, where study abroad can take a different approach too. Like mostly it involves moving completely to a different country. But what if it's just spending a semester connecting with the faculty in that country and the librarians in that country, which will be--personally I'm like, that'd be really cool because it would make it more attainable for people who are low income. And are like, I can't afford to spend a semester in Morocco, but I can afford--because nothing changes. I can live here--I can still connect with all the faculty and learn from instructors in Morocco. And it would still be kind of cool, you know. So would offer more options for people in that way.

TRACK 11. OUTRO [Hear episode on Spotify]

Hey, it's me again. Sheila and Charlie the AI Cat bring us to the end of this piece. I hope listening to these exchanges between oral historians and digital librarians has inspired you to think of new ideas about what libraries could be and ask new questions to speculate about.

I know for me, all of the interviews moved me to imagine new ways of working and being in libraries. After Chris and Justin's conversation, I imagined digital public libraries that foster place-based connections through digital technology. What might that look like? Honestly, Craigslist or Buy-Nothing groups are the closest things I can think of. Those kinds of digital spaces rely on a shared physical proximity and the possibility of in-person interaction. But the digital space is still key to the whole system working. I wonder what libraries could learn from those kinds of digital spaces and interactions.

Tamara and Sheila's exchange made me imagine what it would be like to make libraries more ephemeral. For example, what would it be like to have a library with no collections but lots of staff trained to help patrons navigate information online or share

their own ideas online or in person? Would that still be a library? What could we do in a library like that that isn't possible now?

Benji and Sean made me think about how we might integrate research library collections and research library worker expertise into everyday people's cosmic purposes. That sounds grandiose. What I mean is, how do we get more cooks into library collections? More quilters? More teachers and bus drivers and grocery store workers? How do we make digital collections belong to more people outside of universities? How would our work be different if this were our goal?

I have so many thoughts and questions, and I hope you do too. I would love if you would share your reactions to any part of this piece with me. You can reach me at kk3344@columbia.edu. Please please please send an email or, even better, a voice note. I won't post your thoughts anywhere without your permission—I just want to know what you're thinking.

Before I let you go, I have some acknowledgements and thank yous. First of all, thank you to the oral historian and librarian narrators in this piece—Chris Pandza, Justin de la Cruz, Tamara Santibañez, Sheila García Mazari, Benji de la Piedra, Sean Knowlton.

Next, I want to acknowledge the hard work of my JCDL open peer reviewers, Rachel Starry, Sophie Ziegler, and Emily Zinger. Not only did they deftly navigate an unusual format for a journal article, they also listened to all of the unedited interviews to help guide my editorial decisions. Thank you so much, Rachel, Sophie, and Emily. Producing this piece has been a rewarding experience in large part because of your editorial work.

All of the music you heard in this piece is by Patricia Traxxon, an artist on Bandcamp who makes excellent Creative Commons music. Go check her out! There's a link in the transcript.

Thanks again for listening. Until next time, I'm Kae Bara Kratcha, signing off.