

Interview with Zaheer Ali

MICHAEL SESLING: [00:00:03] Awesome. And, um, take as much time as you need as you get yourself (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

ZAHEER ALI: [00:00:10] I think that's about as good as it's gonna get.

MS: [00:00:14] Um, so welcome. And thank you. Appreciate you being here today and uh, joining us. Our goal is to record a client testimonial.

ZA: [00:00:24] Yeah.

MS: [00:00:24] Uh, this is the first time that we are trying this. Something new. Um, a lot of times we will utilize quotes that people use in our marketing materials, but we wanna try a video and see how that works.

ZA: [00:00:37] Okay.

MS: [00:00:38] Um, and we'll be using this across all of our marketing platforms. Um, which Hanassa has done an awesome job of helping us build over her time here. Um, I thought it would also be great just, um, to give some brief intros. Important for you both to also know who you are and, um, as a reminder I'm Michael, vice president of the Audio Transcription Center. Um, been here since January 2nd of 2006. I can't believe it's over 18 years now. Um, and, um, this is Hanassa.

HANASSA WICKS: [00:01:17] Hello, nice to meet you. Um, I have been with ATC for just under a year. It'll be a year, I want to say at the end of June, beginning of July. Um, (clears throat) I'm in the U.P. of Michigan. Um, other than that I -- I could go on and on and on about myself for days (laughter). All the different things. But, uh, I have my own virtual administrative, virtual assistant business. Um, I've done some transcription work as well as other work in the transcription field.

ZA: [00:01:58] Great. Uh, I guess I -- so I'm introducing myself as well. Um, I'm Zaheer Ali. I am currently the executive director of the Hutchins Institute for Social Justice. Which is a secondary school initiative at the Lawrenceville School, an independent day and boarding school in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. Um, that advances social justice through uh, scholarship programming and experiential learning. Um, prior to this I was the oral historian at Brooklyn Historical Society, which is now The Center for Brooklyn History. Uh, and I was there for five years. And, um, before that, in terms of I guess the work that brought me into contact with Audio Transcription Center, uh, was my work on the Malcolm X project at Columbia University under the direction of the late, um, Manning Marable.

MS: [00:03:02] Thank you for that and I cannot believe you were at Brooklyn for five years. It's amazing.

ZA: [00:03:09] Yeah.

MS: [00:03:10] It was like that.

ZA: [00:03:12] It did seem to go by fast.

MS: [00:03:15] Um, so I guess if we could start with how -- how did you first get involved in the world of oral history?

ZA: [00:03:25] I (clears throat) -- I think my, you know, I probably uh, had done interviews as like a high school student --

MS: [00:03:36] Mmm.

ZA: [00:03:36] And, um, as a, a research, uh, graduate -- as a undergraduate research project, I did, I worked from The Pluralism Project at Harvard, um, which was, uh, designed to document Non-Judeo Christian religious traditions in America. And I had received as an undergraduate a grant to um, research, African American Muslim communities in New York City. And, and part of that was to interview people. But I wasn't really trained formally in the practices of oral history uh, until I was a graduate student at Columbia working with, um, Manning Marable on the Malcolm X project. And um, part of that project was to construct as detailed as possible a biographical account of Malcolm X's life. And we realized very quickly that most of the sources that

were available were -- many of them were hostile sources.

MS: [00:04:43] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:04:43] Uh like, FBI documents, police reports, um, you know, um, so called mainstream media publications that were not sympathetic to Malcolm or his politics. And, um, in order to really get a sense of a fuller dimension of, of Malcolm, and especially um, an understanding of the interior life of Malcolm and the communities that, um, he was a part of that often received shallow if any coverage in the archives, we had to talk to people. And so um, Manning, um, sent us, a group of us who were researchers working with him to the summer -- the Oral History Summer Institute that Columbia operated. And I think it was -- it was a fairly new initiative um, under the direction of Mary Marshall Clark, uh, there at Columbia. I think it was, is maybe in its second or third year. And so that was like a two week uh, crash course really in um, you know, the basics and fundamentals of oral history practice and methods. And with that, began doing interviews for the Malcolm X project.

MS: [00:6:03] That's amazing. S-- How did you first get involved with Dr. Marable?

ZA: [00:06:13] Um, I was applying to graduate school and I went to meet him after I had gotten in and um, he asked me what

I wanted to study. You know, what I wanted to work on. And uh, as soon as I told him Malcolm X (laughter) he's like, "Wait." And he told me that he had been working on um, uh, you know a project on Malcolm for at least, at that point, um, maybe, you know, ten or fifteen years that he'd sort of picked up and put down, picked up and put down. And that, you know, um, he looked forward to my coming to Columbia because he saw it as an opportunity to kind of pick that back up again.

MS: [00:07:01] Mmm. That was amazing, the timing.

ZA: [00:07:08] Yeah, it was amazing, and you know, for, for people who, who um, are thinking about graduate school um, one of the most important things you can have as a graduate student is a faculty mentor or advisor who um, not only believes but understands in the value of your uh subject.

MS: [00:07:30] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:07:30] And so um, you know, the, the work and the process of -- of -- of like pursuing your own research is so much more enhanced and made possible and easy, uh, not easy in terms of the work, but just easier to try to do, um, when you have a faculty advisor who is like, this is really important. So, um, I was really fortunate to get to, you know, for us to meet and, um, that he was at a point in his career where he was thinking of this next

project um, which would be his -- unbeknownst to him, his final project. And I was meeting with him to do what would have been -- been my first project. So--

MS: [00:08:20] Mmm.

ZA: [00:08:21] Um, it was really fortuitous moment um, that provided so many opportunities including the opportunity to work, um, and become more adept as an oral historian.

MS: [00:08:35] That's remarkable. Do you um, thinking about the work that you all ended up doing with the Audio Transcription Center, do you recall why Dr. Marable decided to work with the Audio Transcription Center?

ZA: [00:08:54] So I think um, Dr. Marable and decided -- I'm sorry I mean like -- Dr. Marable decided to work with, um, the Audio Transcription Center um, in part because of the reputation --

MS: [00:09:08] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:09:09] -- of the center among oral historians um, in terms of -- so there's a, you know it's, when you're transcribing um, it's not just simply like I'm putting down the words that I'm hearing, um, and, and sometimes there are words or phrases or concepts or ways that people speak that are not immediately audible or legible. And so there's a lot of contextual information that, that you must have or that helps you and the reputation of the Audio

Transcription Center and its transcribers that, you know, that these -- these aren't, you know, this isn't like AI. Right. Like, these are people who um, have uh, a sense of the field of oral history and uh, and for our purposes, a sense of the field of, of American history. And so the reputation of the Center um, amongst people who were practicing oral history um, certainly, um, I think a recommendation came from Columbia's oral history program as one of the possible vendors for us to explore. And so you know, I think that that -- those were the, the primary um, factors.

MS: [00:10:36] Do you think that it had anything to do as well, with the poor quality of the recordings and relation to the reputation that we have at the Audio Transcription Center?

ZA: [00:10:49] Yeah, I think um -- so some of the recordings we had were from these like reel-to-reel (laughter) reel-to-reel tapes. So thi-- so, so there was the um, transcription of the oral histories, which you know, were in the quality that I think they were supposed to be in. Um, but then we acquired in our research these reel-to-reel tapes um, that we didn't even know what they were on. Um, we didn't know what was -- what were -- what was on them, and we worked with -- I cannot remember the vendor off the top of my head in Philadelphia, um --

MS: [00:11:28] (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) Uh, yeah, George Blood Audio was their name.

ZA: [00:11:31] George Blood. Which I think that recommendation came from, from you guys. Um, so we sent these tapes to George Blood in Philadelphia to, to get the audio. And it was -- and basically you know, I remember the vendor saying, "These -- we have one play left on these tapes. Like, we play it and this is probably unplayable." So they extracted the audio and um, you know, having listened to the audio, there were -- it was almost like two recordings were on the tape.

MS: [00:12:13] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:12:13] Um, going forward and backward. And so you could hear, at a lower level, backwards speech over you know, what was the primary recording. And we were like, this is a mess. And I think um, coming back to what I was saying about like why Audio Transcription Center was you know, came highly recommended from oral historians, um, you know, this Audio transcription Center and the services that they provide, again, is it's not simply recognizing sound. It's making meaning, right. Like, you, you want a transcription service that is going to understand the meaning of what is being conveyed on the recording, um, because uh, you know, for us as researchers who um, for

whom the transcript is usually the first go-to and especially if we're dealing with audio that is such poor quality um, we need a transcription that gives as much information as possible of what is on the recording. And when I say information I don't again just mean sounds, I mean meaning, right. And so I can imagine uh, or only like barely imagine the arduous process it was to transcribe the recordings, those archival recordings we had, which by that point were probably 50 years old. Um, and, and not just you know, convey basic words, but to be able to understand what possibly is happening here, right. Um, in order to, to deliver something to us that could be useful as a research archive.

MS: [00:14:07] Typically, we estimate five or six hours of work for every hour of recording. For most projects. The time that we spent on the reel-to-reel recordings that were then digitized was -- and this was based on Dr. Marable telling me personally, "I don't care how long it takes, spend the time to do it. I have the funds available." And it was 25 hours of work on average for every hour of recording. It's was just, unbelievable.

ZA: [00:14:43] Yeah, and I think um, that speaks to again, it's it having the resources, but it speaks to having a um, a vendor or company, a transcriber that has the capacity to

do that kind of work, right.

MS: [00:15:01] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:15:01] Um, we understood, not only how critical these sources were uh, because they were, they were sitting in someone's garage like these --

MS: [00:15:12] Right.

ZA: [00:15:12] The -- these recordings had like never been heard probably ever, right. Um, they were recorded for I guess to re -- just kind of historical reasons where every meeting was recorded. But I don't think anyone had ever listened to them. And so, you know, this, this had a potential of, of, like, you know, being like kind of a gold mine in terms of, of, of research. You, as a historian, you want to be able to find archival sources that have yet -- have not yet been tapped into um, because that increases the chances of you bringing new insight to a subject that has already been covered. And so I, I, I, I remember you know, talking with um, Manning about these recordings, and he you know, just even the, the work of getting them um, you know, the, the audio preserved or you know, digitized, getting those tape -- getting those tapes digitized, he was like, "Whatever it takes." Like, "Just, just make it happen." So, um, you know, that was his spirit. Which I was really fortunate to witness but, we, we sensed that

there were things on these recordings that might you know, really help in understanding what we were researching.

MS: [00:16:51] It, it's --

HW: [00:16:52] I have a question just to interject right there. Was there any point in time when you -- when you guys maybe heard or read something in a transcript that was like the gold mine moment? Like, that's what I've been waiting for. Yes. And what was your reaction and what was Dr. Marable's reaction?

ZA: [00:17:13] So in fact it was one of those reel-to-reel recordings um, just to kind of give you some background. In Malcolm X's history um, when he is a minister of the Nation of Islam in Harlem, his um, sort of second in command is um, so the way that the organization was set up, you had the minister and then you had the, the population was um, organized by gender. So you had, a captain of the women and a captain of the men. And then you had like the secretary, treasurer, right. Who was called a secretary. So you have these four officials who lead every local mosque or temple. And the, the brother captain and Malcolm had been together for many years. They were together when Malcolm was first sent to Philadelphia and they were sent to New York together. And um, we had read or heard that there was a point in time where um, Malcolm had to publicly

discipline the captain for an infraction. Now this is not unusual in that you know, organization or community. If a member falls short of one of the kind of laws of the community, they're brought before the community and in -- and sort of stood trial and then some kind of punishment is made it out. Like, 30-day suspension, 60-day suspension, you know that kind of thing. Um, so that's not unusual for that to happen. But that um, that Malcolm had to do it to his captain, uh, a person who would later um, be one of his, um, fiercest um, critics and opponents when Malcolm left the Nation, um, could have been a way to understand a thread that began to build over the course of their relationship of, of resentment or separation or what have you. Um, now that's disputed just to say like, there are some people who are like, no, the captain was just a soldier and he knew what he had to do and he just accepted his fate. Fine. Nonetheless, this was something we read about or heard people talk about. When we listened to the recordings one of those recordings -- actually we didn't listen to 'em. When we read the transcript of one of those recordings, it was the actual transcript of the trial.

HW: [00:19:59] Oh wow.

ZA: [00:20:00] The thing that everyone had talked about, that had mentioned, we actually had the transcript of the

proceedings of that trial.

HW: [00:20:12] Wow.

ZA: [00:20:12] And that was amazing. That was amazing. I still have people emailing me asking me, do I have that recording. (laughter). Uh, because, it's, it's remarkable, right. Like, first of all to, you know, most of the recordings of Malcolm that are in public circulation are, are speeches that he gave in outside venues like radio station interviews, uh, he spoke at a rally, you know, that kind of thing. This was Malcolm in the c -- like, in the temple or in the mosque, in the 1950's before he really becomes like a public figure, right. Um, where we get an insight into how Malcolm is, um, growing as a leader, but, but within the interiority of that community. Just remarkable, uh, a remarkable find and um, you know, had we just had to sit and listen to the audio, it, it would have taken us a lot more time to understand what we were listening to --

MS: [00:21:30] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:21:30] Than where we were able to look at the transcript and kind of see you know, when you're listening to an au -- when you're listening to an audio, your mind, it's sort of like moving with the sound, right. And if you're really listening, you're, you're not like holding on

to what you heard five minutes ago, right. You're listening to what is in the moment. Being able to look at all of that in a transcript, you're able to put a particular chunk in the greater context of what came before and what came after. And that's how we were able to like, wait, this is the trial. So, I think that's how the transcript really helped us um, understand what the value was in that recording.

HW: [00:22:14] That's amazing. (laughter).

MS: [00:22:17] Thank you for that. That is remarkable and what I love hearing you talk about this now, is I have this memory of Dr. Marable calling after you all read that transcript and I can still hear the exuberance in his voice telling me about this find and explaining --

ZA: [00:22:36] Mmhmm.

MS: [00:22:27] -- just as you did. Um, that's just remarkable to hear you say it with really, that same level of exuberance all these years later.

ZA: [00:22:45] Yeah. That was --

MS: [00:22:47] Um.

ZA: [00:22:47] -- a great day. I remember that.

MS: [00:22:51] Uh. It's amazing to -- you know, and I remember him saying as you just did, that was the first time you know, since it was recorded anybody had gone back and

listened to that.

ZA: [00:23:01] Mmhmm.

MS: [00:23:02] And I feel like I remember him saying he had spent 25 years researching to prove that this had happened.

ZA: [00:23:10] Mmm.

MS: [00:23:10] And -- and he said that that was the reason he wanted to call and personally say thank you.

ZA: [00:23:15] Mmhmm.

MS: [00:23:17] Um, just amazing. Um, in relation to you and your work with Dr. Marable, um, I went back through the book copy that I have.

ZA: [00:23:28] Yeah.

MS: [00:23:29] Um, I had picked this up -- is it about 15 years ago?

ZA: [00:23:36] Mmm.

MS: [00:23:36] More than that that this came out roughly.

ZA: [00:23:37] Yeah, uh, 20 --

MS: [00:23:39] Is it 20

ZA: [00:23:40] 11.

MS: [00:23:40] (overlapping dialogue) Okay, so a little -- little less than that.

ZA: [00:23:42] 2011. Yeah.

MS: [00:23:43] Um, so on page 492 in the acknowledgments, um, Dr. Marable writes, "One of my Columbia University doctoral

assistants, Zaheer Ali, made many important contributions as the Malcolm X Projects Associate Director for four years. Especially during the development of the multimedia version of the autobiography. Zaheer's extensive knowledge of the Nation of Islam as well as Orthodox Islam, expanded our study to include the voices of Black Muslims like Louis Farrakhan." What are your thoughts about this quote as you reflect back upon your relationship with Dr. Marable?

ZA: [00:24:27] Um, you know, when I first read that quote, I was deeply moved. And of course, um, for those who do not know, the um, Manning um, passed away, I think three or four days before the book came out. So for many of us, um, you know, for me this was sort of the, the, the 1 -- one of the most important remnants of me like --

MS: [00:24:54] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:24:54] -- holding on to a relationship to a person, um, and an experience that I wasn't ready to let go of, um, in the way that time had determined. Um, so it was really emotional reading that um, acknowledgment, which I deeply appreciate. Um, and I, I will say that um, I was fortunate that Manning, um, worked with me in a way that uh, trusted --

MS: [00:25:28] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:25:28] -- um, me, to make those kinds of contributions.

Now we, we had a lot of arguments (laughter). We had a lot of debates. Um, he was not dogmatic. You know, so he didn't, he didn't necessitate our accepting his point of view, uh, to work with him. But he did ask of us to be rigorous. And he did as of us to adhere to you know, best practices and methods. Um, so we, we, we debated a lot. But, um, he did trust me to help us make sure that our understanding of Malcolm um, understood the religious dimensions, um, of Malcolm. I think when Manning first started, and he said this when he first started working on this project, it was going to be a political biography that really focused on Malcolm's um, politics. And through the course of our work on the Malcolm X project which included developing a multimedia annotated version of the autobiography, we realized that in order to understand who Malcolm was to himself and to his communities and to us now, we had to look at Malcolm not just through the lens of politics, but through the lens of culture. Through the lens of religion. And through the lens of transnationalism.

MS: [00:26:56] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:26:57] And, um, understanding how Islam in all of its iterations um, was integral to all of those lenses, uh, was key. And, you know, this is in the early -- this is in the

early 2000's. We are probably in -- we began our project the summer before 9/11 and um -- or a year before 9/11. I think he and I started working on this project in the summer of 2000 but the Malcolm X project like formally launched I think in 2001.

MS: [00:27:37] Mmm.

ZA: [00:27:37] And so we were working in a, in a contemporary - - contemporaneous context where Islam and Muslims were, um, being portrayed in a way that flattened the diversity of, of those histories and people that um, erased um, you know, certain populations, because it was like who comes to mind when you think of Muslim and who doesn't, right. And so Black Muslims in particular um, were, sort of doubly margin -- marginalized because so much of the work and research on the religion and culture of Black America is very much informed by the powerful, influence of the church, right. Um, and so much of the work and research on Muslims in America, especially at that moment, was shaped by um, people who were recent immigrants or descendants of immigrants. And so in both fields of study um, people who are Black and Muslim were often not centered or were marginalized or their voices erased. And so, you know, through the work of oral history, which is designed in part for many people to um, amplify voices that have been

marginalized or silenced in the archive, uh, we were able to uh, include the voices um, and the experiences of African American Muslims uh, as a really important dimension for understanding who Malcolm X was, and who he continues to be for many people.

MS: [00:29:23] Hmm. Thank you for that insight. Um, I want to jump into a little bit of life after Columbia for a bit. I know your time is also limited and um, after graduating from Columbia you said that you went on to work at the Brooklyn Historical Society, I know you said there's a new name for them now. What was that again?

ZA: [00:29:51] Um, so they're now The Center for Brooklyn History uh, that's now part of Brooklyn Public Library. But at the time, um, until I -- until after I left, they were Brooklyn Historical Society. So I still call them Brooklyn Historical. (laughter).

MS: [00:30:09] I'm, I'm glad I'm not alone in that. I'm in good company. Um, so shortly after you had moved over there, you called upon us um, to continue as a transcription vendor with you. What made you continue to use us at this new organization?

ZA: [00:30:28] So, after -- when I first started Brooklyn Historical Society um, one of the first projects we had uh, was to digitize um, audio cassette, analog cassette

recordings that had been part of this oral history collection. And um, the ear -- the oldest collection had been completed in like 1972 or 19 --

MS: [00:30:56] Hmm.

ZA: [00:30:56] Early 70's. So, you know, I started working there in 2015. So, were, were, were looking at 35, 40 year old recordings. Once again, you know, I'm like déjà vu. We have these 35, 45 year old re -- um, some of which had never been transcribed um, and the ones that had been transcribed had been transcribed in that moment in the way that transcriptions were done. They were more, um, -- we didn't even know if they were accurate, right. Like they were -- they, and they, they certainly weren't um, the standard that we had come to expect in terms of oral history practices. And so once again, boxed up tapes and sent them to George Blood. (laughter). And the vendor in, in Pennsylvania that did the digitization for the analog tapes. But even the ones that we had that were analog, you know, decided once again to work with Audio Transcription Center. Again, because this um, Audio Transcription Center is just was the leading you know, just a leader in the field for transcribing oral histories. Um, and, and doing it in a way that reflected and respected the voices that were on the recording. Um, that this is not again, simply

just a matter of getting the words down. But being able, with you know, I think we had even more um, by this point, I think we had like -- I, and I wouldn't call it a style guide, but we had like, here's how we want silences to be represented. Here's how we want you know, certain kinds of um, you know, off, uh, topic, uh, references or, or audible gestures like smi -- laughing or you know, size -- here's how we want -- so I think working with a partner in a transcription service that is willing to respond to the customized needs of what our archival practices were, um, we, I knew that Audio Transcription Center would be the best to work with in that sense.

MS: [00:33:16] Thank you for that. Um, I was just quickly looking back, 'cause I had this memory while you were -- as we're chatting about all of this, um, a project that I believe you maybe started, or led while you were at Brooklyn Historical. Um, Muslims in Brooklyn Project.

ZA: [00:33:36] Yes. Um --

MS: [00:33:38] Was that --

ZA: [00:33:40] -- go ahead.

MS: [00:33:40] No, I was just gonna say if you could talk about a little and --

ZA: [00:33:43] Sure. Sure. So the first project that I mentioned was called Voices of Generations. And, I think

we had like ten collections that had to be either digitized and transcribed and so, and processed. And that was a -- that was like our first um, really, you know first engagement as part of Brooklyn Historical Society. My last project at Brooklyn Historical Society was called Muslims in Brooklyn, um, where we interviewed I think 55 or 56 people. Um, it was a project designed to document the long, diverse, and integral histories of Muslims to Brooklyn in New York City and the United States. Um, what's really funny is I think about it now, it's almost like a full circle because we were doing this project in the midst of um, Donald Trump's presidency.

MS: [00:34:37] Mmm.

ZA: [00:34:38] And the like, Muslim ban being upheld by the Supreme Court and a -- once again, another moment where Muslims are being portrayed in flattened, one-dimensional ways and stereotyped and marginalized and voices not heard, right. So, it's, you know, it, it was almost a full circle moment now that I think about it. But this project interviewed um, I think, uh, some of our narrators were in their 80's and some of their -- our narrators were in their 20's. So wide age span, people who had immigrated to the United States, people who had been in the United States for multiple generations, people who were descendants of

enslaved people. Um, it was, it covered many different cultural, cultural groups and ethnicities. Um, and many different um, class, uh, signifiers in terms of levels of educational attainment or business or, or, kinds of professions. And so once again, you know, um, a few things were really important. One is um, working with a transcription service that is going to respect um, the sacredness of these encounters, uh, that you know, when you do an oral history, this is a person gifting you their story.

MS: [00:36:18] Mmhmm.

ZA: [00:36:18] Um, and in the context of this project these were people who by gifting us their story, were giving themselves over to a kind of visibility and audibility that marked them in a moment where, um, that might be concerning right. And so, um, you know, I think back to even with the Malcolm X project, but certainly with the Muslims in Brooklyn project, we wanted a transcription service um, to ensure that these materials would be treated sensitively. Um, that there would um, be that sort of honor and respect for what these exchanges were that were in the recording. And then of course, you know, transcriptions that met the standards of our archival process and practice um, that would make it, um, you know, possible for us to put um, and

easily put these oral histories online. So they are, you know, these oral histories are published online. The audio is synchronized to the transcript. So once again, needing a high level of accuracy um, in order to make that um, you know, a seamless process. And these oral histories and their transcripts, um, were used to build out a curriculum. And so, um, you know, the transcripts and the, the, the use of transcription services were critical to how we understand oral histories and the oral history process which is that in, you know, in oral history the act of con -- of con -- uh, conducting oral history is not concluded when you hit stop on the recording.

MS: [00:38:10] Mmm.

ZA: [00:38:10] The act of conducting oral history is concluded when you have made that interview available and accessible to a broader public. And so, you know, central to that or essential to that is a transcription where we don't have to do a whole lot of work to clean up, right. So, um, by this point when I'm -- when I was doing the Muslims in Brooklyn project, um, I had you know, I guess we could say, a twenty year with some gaps in, you know, as changes with jobs, but, twenty years off and on working with ATC um, so the, you know, we really trusted um, you know, ATC in terms of handling the material. Again, transcription is not just a

phonetic rendering of what's on the audio. There is some meaning making that has to happen which is especially important when there might be terms used or, or language you know, people, when we did these interviews, people would slip Arabic in, it's just sort of natural in the way that they talk. And so, making sure that service that we use would be, uh, able to you know, convey that. Um, and then just on the nuts and bolts side, um, you know, this was a grant funded project. And so we had a budget and being able to predict you know, the cost of these transcriptions um, and seeing that the cost, um, you know, often came very close to what was projected helped us determine how many interviews we could afford to do. Um, and so, having that sort of consistency um, made it possible for us to project and plan the work that we were doing.

MS: [00:40:10] Fabulous. Thank you. Um, your resume. Your resume is rather extensive and impressive. Um, my next question (laughter), I realize it's kind of like asking me which of my three children is my favorite.

ZA: [00:40:29] (laughter).

MS: [00:40:30] To which I will always answer Noah is my favorite oldest child, Lilah's my favorite middle child, (laughter; inaudible) my favorite youngest child. What's

been your favorite project to work on over your years --

ZA: [00:40:44] Hmm.

MS: [00:40:44] Or the one that has meant the most to you in some capacity, and why?

ZA: [00:40:51] Hmm. Uh, that's a very challenging question. Um, for -- I, I, and I would want to answer it the way that you answered your children question, right. Like, there's the, there's the project that like launched me into the work that I, I do and um, and, and, and launched me into so many ways of thinking as um, someone who studies history. Uh, and, you know, that, that, that would be the Malcolm X project. Like it was really, for many reasons including the relationship with Manning Marable, um, who is no longer here, and his wife, um, Leith Mullings, who's, who a brilliant scholar in her own right. Who's also no longer here. Um, so there is just like that personal relationships and also just the professional development as a researcher and scholar would be the Malcolm X project. Um, and then I would say, you know, the Muslims in Brooklyn project is probably, um, it's the last major oral history project that I did. Um, and I think was as close as I think I got and maybe will get to a 360 project. It was --

MS: [00:42:03] Mmm.

ZA: [00:42:04] -- oral history, so it was archival, it was

programming, it was community engagement, it was an exhibition, it was an educational curriculum. So, you know, it was this really, really, fully developed, well rounded project that um, is still, still has legs, right. The oral histories are still online. The curriculum is still available and being used. So, um, in terms of like my work as an oral historian, I think that it's kind of like, an, an apex moment. I don't know that I will, given what I'm doing you know, at this point, I don't know that I'll be able to come back to doing an oral history so, like this was a multiyear um, you know, um, project, that was so encompassing. Um, but I, I would have to say like the, what I'm doing right now, um, is, um, the work in developing -- I'm the inaugural executive director of the Hutchins Institute for Social Justice. So this is a, a brand new endeavor that I took on, um, to bring -- and, and, think about the question of what does social justice look like in the classroom? Especially at the secondary school level. And for that I am drawing on all of the things I witnessed Manning Marable do in building the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia. For all that I studied, um, Henry Louis Gates do when I was his student at Harvard and, and seeing him build up African American studies. Um, and all of the skills of

listening and community engagement, um, and culture change work, um, that, uh, my work as an oral historian informed. So it's all, like all of these threads now um, are, I'm able to make sense of them in, in this endeavor. And so for right now, I would say this that I'm doing is um, both the most challenging but also rewarding.

MS: [00:44:22] All of this has, it's the fabric of your being.

ZA: [00:44:26] Yes! You know, I, I was talking to my mom one day and you know, she was like, you know, people say things happen for a reason and she was like, "Well, it only happens for a reason if you learn from it. And you use it. So, make the reasons." And so, I, I imagine I could have gone in some other direction and I would have made sense out of wherever I was, but right now I'm able to make sense so easily from those experiences.

MS: [00:45:00] Amazing. Thank you so much. Hanassa, did you have any other follow up questions?

HW: [00:45:08] No follow up questions. This was re -- amazing to listen to. I have, could probably talk to you all day but, it's very interesting. We just had another meeting yesterday for um, Black voices and AI for the OHA symposium this summer and a lot of what you said today was echoed yesterday. So it's very, very interesting just to hear you talk and make the connections and the correlations and I'm

very new in this world, and it's been fascinating since I started.

ZA: [00:45:47] Well, thank you. Um, and I thank you for the opportunity to revisit these threads and sort of tighten them up in the fabric, right. And even make, make even more sense of them in terms of my life. So, I appreciate that. And always appreciate any opportunity to um, uh, remember um, Manning Marable and his work.

MS: [00:46:14] It was um, for us, I tell you, an honor, um, to be able to work with you, with Dr. Marable, um, with -- I'm coming back in my brain, Courtney Teague.

ZA: [00:46:26] Oh yes! Yes.

MS: [00:46:29] Um, it was just a phenomenal project that I know and remember the transcriptionists, um, were there complaints? Yes, absolutely. Because the audio was so challenging. And people needed to step away for a moment and disconnect and come back to it and be able to, um, pardon the expression, but kind of become one with it again. And then say, okay wait, now it's difficult again, I need to take these headphones off. 'Cause the recording quality was so challenging. Um, and it took multiple passes by multiple people that really made up that full 25 hours of work that I mentioned earlier. Um, and I'm not sure how many um, Zoom calls that Hanassa has been with,

uh, at this point, has been a part of with me, where I've hold up this book as we're in Zoom and talk about these recordings and what was involved in that. Um, and just we, here we are all these years later, and just still are so honored to have been a part of it. So greatly appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule, and being able to talk to us today.

ZA: [00:47:47] Well thank you again. Um, and if you know, there are any other ways that I can be of assistance, please let me know.

MS: [00:47:54] Much appreciated.

HW: [00:47:56] Thank you so much. It was so nice to meet you.

ZA: [00:47:58] Likewise.

MS: [00:48:00] Thank you Zaheer.

ZA: [00:48:01] Okay. Bye.

MS: [00:48:02] Be well. Bye bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE