(Dis)Placed Urban Histories: Combining Digital Humanities Pedagogy and Community

Engagement

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The course "(Dis)Placed Urban Histories" has been offered each spring since 2015 at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and brings a historian's perspective to investigating the impacts of gentrification and urban planning strategies in rapidly changing communities in New York City. During the 2016 and 2017 course iterations, Professor Rebecca Amato, collaborated with librarian, Zach Coble, to create online digital exhibits to showcase the students' fieldwork and to create a resource for participating community partners. While the faculty-library partnership was successful in creating a digital humanities pedagogy that helped students build methodological and technical skills, the process also revealed shortcomings about working with communities with low access to computers or with aging populations with few technical skills.

Course Overview

Neighborhood change comes in many varieties. Mid-twentieth-century urban renewal in US cities brought bulldozers and tower-in-the-park housing developments to dozens of poor neighborhoods considered ripe for revision. Twenty-first-century gentrification, meanwhile, has brought high-end commerce and affluence to areas once occupied by low-income and working-class communities. In both the South Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn and the Melrose neighborhood of the South Bronx, a series of changes has influenced the streetscapes and lives of residents. Deindustrialization, arson, landlord abandonment, and a mid-1970s city policy of "planned shrinkage" made large areas of both neighborhoods dangerous or unlivable, while migrants from Puerto Rico and the American Black Belt and immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Ecuador, among other places, struggled to survive in what remained of their communities. Today, massive reinvestment in these neighborhoods, as well as large-scale rezonings, have resulted in new middle-income and luxury housing and business development that has increased displacement pressures on these still predominantly low-income communities of color. (See fig. 27.1.)

LOSING SOUL

Charlotte St. c. 1975

With ruin comes abandonment, and with abandonment, comes ruin. In *GovPilot*'s article discussing the fall and rise of the South Bronx, writer "alannah" argues that the stereotypical image that is associated with the South Bronx -- of burning buildings, the subsequent rubble, and the poor people who used to inhabit said buildings -- is the, "physical manifestation of improperly applied data, economic depression and the snowballing issue of property blight." She says that as "[droves] of residents left the South Bronx for more suburban areas and [as] property values plummeted ... [r]emaining residents watched their living conditions begin to deteriorate. After all, post-WWII rent control policies provided building owners little incentive to maintain their properties." Furthermore, alannah talks specifically about the mishandling by then-Mayor Lindsay of data regarding the fire departments' budgets and other similarly city-run benefits, that were either downsized, eliminated, or misused in the area.

Also, the property developers and owners were quick to allow their buildings to fall into disarray, as the residents were all low-income, and therefore the upkeep was often more expensive than their return. Red-lining and zoning plans implemented by real estate agencies were also vital players in the fall of the area.

This course, offered in partnership with the Brooklyn-based community organization Southside United HDFC in 2015 and 2016 and the Bronx-based community organization WHEDCo (Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation) in 2017 and 2018, invites students to become activist historians whose objective is to collaboratively interpret the impact of neighborhood change on long-time residents and workers in South Williamsburg and Melrose. Students conduct oral history interviews and archival and secondary research, meet with activists and residents who are working to protect the interests of the current communities of these neighborhoods, and produce collaborative digital projects that are intended to be accessible to community organizations and residents for the long term. Oral history training takes place in the classroom through readings, practice interviews, and listening sessions. Students read chapters from classics in the field such as Alessandro Portelli's "What Makes Oral History Different" and, Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless's *History of Oral History*.[1] They work collectively with the instructor to determine potential interview questions,

and they review both the ethical guidelines for Research on Human Subjects (via NYU's Institutional Review Board) and the process of working with release forms. Students are matched with neighborhood residents and workers who volunteer to be interviewed. Some interviews last the requisite one hour, while others go on much longer or are followed by additional interviews. In at least two cases, students have maintained friendships with their subjects. Even when the course has shifted away from oral history toward deep, place-based research, students have developed affinities for the neighborhoods they study in surprising ways. As one student from the Bronx who participated in the spring of 2018 iteration writes, "Through the research that I conducted within this course, I now have greater respect for my community, gaining a greater understanding of its historical significance within New York City." When combined with the existing scholarship on these neighborhoods and their histories, the oral histories and archives of personal items the students produce offer a glimpse into the lives of ordinary New Yorkers whose sense of place in the city is increasingly at risk. Students become both historians and coproducers of primary documents.

In each iteration of the course, the culminating project has been both a digital presentation and a public program through which the results of research are shared with the community. From 2015 to 2017, the public program was a free, museum-quality exhibit temporarily installed in the community under study. In 2018, the students produced historical narratives for the history-based app Clio, all of which will inform WHEDco's project to create historical markers and walking tours in Melrose and nearby Morrisania within the next year.

Digital Humanities Pedagogy

In 2016 and 2017, the library supported the course by providing online hosting space and technical support for digital exhibits. The support was offered by the Digital Scholarship Services (DSS) Department at NYU Libraries, which helps faculty and students incorporate digital humanities tools and methods into their research and teaching, including help with project management, data analysis and visualization, and digital storage and publishing. To streamline this suite of services, DSS began offering the Web Hosting service in 2016. Web Hosting uses Reclaim Hosting's Domain of One's Own service to provide flexible, shared-hosting web publishing environments, including one-click installation for popular content management systems such as WordPress and Omeka. The "(Dis)Placed Urban Histories" course used this service to build two Omeka sites, one for the South Williamsburg community and another for the Melrose neighborhood of the South Bronx.[2] Moreover, this type of collaboration represents an ideal partnership for the library, by providing easy-to-use technical infrastructure and light instructional training in support of NYU's digital humanities pedagogy.[3] (See fig. 27.2.)

THE OLD LOS SURES

He went to P.S. 37 for a year until it closed, then P.S. 17 on North 4th for a year. He got married at 19 to a girl who'd grown up just on the other side of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, who he met while at Junior High School 50 and who in November he'll be married to for 40 years. Jay is a man of commitment, to his family, his friends, his motorcycle club, and undoubtedly his neighborhood. After getting married he moved two buildings over from his mother and aunt, then soon moved with his wife out to Astoria where he still resides, coming back to Los Sures often. When you ask why he moved, why he would ever leave the neighborhood he still clearly loves so much, his answer is simple, he had to.

Me growing up, when we were growing up, the best thing was to leave. Because of what was happening in the neighborhood with the gangs, the gang activity. You know and especially you had kids, and then you didn't want your kids to be growing up in a ghetto, you know? So I was one of the first ones to leave.

Jay and his friends in 1976. This photo was taken on South 2nd Street.
Front row left to right: Norman, Dean, Mingo, Toke & Pike.
Top row: Jay & Tito.

I asked him if was hard to leave what he calls his peoples' "comfort zone," a place his mother refused to leave even while on hospice, eventually dying in the apartment that she'd inhabited for over 50 years.

"My mom, my mom she died here. She was on hospice, hospice at home. And she wouldn't leave this for anything. This was her life. My aunt is the same. She's there, she said "Oh I'm gonna die here." I say ok. Me? I picked up at 19, I left and I never turned back. Thank God."

For Jay, Los Sures is a place to look back on, because in many ways its doesn't exist anymore. Not the Los Sures he knew, anyways. "We used to know all the people in those houses….but now everybody's gone." The tight-knit community he was once a part of has scattered, most leaving the neighborhood or dying there. And he doesn't see this as unnatural, doesn't pin it all on decades of ruthless gentrification. We grow up and get jobs and leave home. We look for something better, often somewhere better, a place that wasn't our parents. And in so we leave behind the old neighborhood for the next wave of inhabitants, often people very much like us, people who will live alongside our mothers or aunts or siblings until they too leave. But that's not happening in Los Sures. The next wave is not Puerto Rican or Dominican immigrants, or their successors. The balance has shifted.

To ensure that their work would be preserved, shared, and legible to a broad audience just as would be any public archive or museum exhibit, students also learned how to translate their academic work into publicly accessible written and visual products. The students were trained in digital humanities methods, specifically in how to use the Omeka digital exhibit platform to transform their coproduced primary documents into a narrative-based online exhibit and archive.[4] Coble visited the course to give an Omeka workshop in which students learned about Omeka as a tool for archiving, curation, and exhibit-building as well as practical skills, such as how to add items and create exhibits in Omeka. While the workshop seemed like a simple

introduction to Omeka, this approach is useful when introducing a new tool and especially when working with students with diverse technical backgrounds.[5]

Prior to each workshop, Coble and Amato would meet to review the website's technical details to ensure they meshed with the course goals and also to establish training goals for the workshop. These brainstorming and planning meetings were helpful for creating a more personalized training session and identifying areas for improvement. For example, during the second year, we included a section on audio editing basics, based on feedback from the previous year's students who had requested more support for creating audio clips of their oral history interviews.

Lessons Learned

Collaboration at all levels of the course development is key to its success. The course changed from year to year based on feedback from and the evolving needs of both community partners and students. As those changes were identified, it was essential to collaboratively brainstorm the ways in which the digital component of the course could be adapted for different outputs. Adaptations included not only introducing different technologies but also serving students at a mix of academic levels with a range of technical knowledge. This meant structuring the training to include everything from the very basics of engaging with the digital tool (e.g., logging on and navigation) to more advanced skills (e.g., effectively using Dublin Core fields in the archive and applying techniques of "good design" to the exhibits). Coble also made himself available to students for one-on-one consultation and technical assistance.

For the purposes of a classroom course, the objectives of training students in historical methods and digital technologies were met quite well. Again, the availability of relatively easy-

to-use digital tools, excellent training and support from the library, a skilled classroom instructor, and open communication between all of the participants proved a recipe for a success.

Limitations occur, most dramatically, in meeting the objective of creating a resource that was accessible to community partners and residents. Many of the community members with whom the class worked were older and did not actively use digital technologies. Some participants did not have computers or email addresses, and, even when they did, neither was used regularly. Delivering a web-based archive and exhibit, then, was interesting, but impractical. Indeed, most of the community members the class interviewed preferred to have their oral histories transcribed and delivered to them in hard copy. If any were interested in hearing their audio files or accessing the web-based project, they would ask Professor Amato and her students to share those pieces with their children or grandchildren instead. For community partners, the web-based projects were more useful but still limited. Since the sites were built and supported by NYU, partners did not have control over them and only had access via clunky, hard-to-remember URLs (e.g., starting with http://hosting.nyu.edu). Bronx-based WHEDco, in particular, made use of the collected oral histories for research and advocacy, and, in May 2019, NYU was able to transfer the site to WHEDco for management at a new, easier to recall URL (www.melrosestories.org).

The course offered all of its stakeholders—that is, the instructor, librarian, students, community partners, and community participants—important lessons about the pedagogical potentials of digital humanities technologies. Perhaps the most illuminating was this: it is important to think critically about how a digital platform will be used and by whom. Through careful planning and collaboration, a digital humanities pedagogy was developed to support course goals and enrich student learning *in the classroom*. Training in tools like Omeka offered

students invaluable experience in creating, cataloging, and interpreting source material, which developed their ability to critically and productively analyze historiographical processes. Challenges emerged when trying to engage broader communities with an equally broad range of relationships with technology. While there can be many good reasons to introduce digital humanities tools and methods in a course, there might also be less obvious reasons why such an approach requires support outside the scope of the traditional university classroom, and it is important to carefully consider the larger goals and context of the course before and during the process.

Notes

[1] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans*, Italian and Italian American Studies, ed. L. D. Giudice (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009); Thomas L. Carlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2007); Thomas L. Carlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Thinking about Oral History: Theories and Applications* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2007).

[2] "Displaced Histories 2016," NYU Gallatin, 2016, http://displacedhistories.hosting.nyu.edu/courses/spring2016/; "(Dis)Placed Urban Histories: Melrose," NYU Gallatin, 2017, http://www.melrosestories.org/.

[3] Yasmeen Shorish, "Data Information Literacy and Undergraduates: A Critical Competency," *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 22, no. 1 (January 2015): 97–106, doi:10.1080/10691316.2015.1001246.

[4] Brett D. Hirsch, ed., *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2012), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0024; Jake Carlson and Lisa Johnston, eds., *Data Information Literacy: Librarians, Data, and the Education of a New Generation of Researchers*, Purdue Information Literacy Handbooks (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2015).

[5] Brandon T. Locke, "Digital Humanities Pedagogy as Essential Liberal Education: A Framework for Curriculum Development," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (2017), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/3/000303/000303.html.