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Bass Connections- Environmental Justice Oral History Project (EJOHP) Reflection

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*As such, we want all students over the course of the semester to catalog their experiences in this course. What has worked? What could you have used more direction on? What did you learn? What would you have liked to learn? Be honest and try to be comprehensive. Although there is no maximum length, journals should be no less than **five-pages single spaced**, unless otherwise specified.*

I never imagined that a one-off conversation would turn into an inter-institutional experience, a leadership role, and a lifetime passion played out. Following an incredible couple of days at Duke's virtual Environmental Justice Symposium in 2021, I reached out to make sure that I could stay involved in the environmental justice space with these students in this area. I have not looked back.

Engaging with the process of collecting oral histories over the last year, I've been amazed at the ways in which students have mobilized, pivoted, and been flexible across the range of projects and collaborations we've built alongside communities. For example, an issue that was reported often was difficulties involving outreach. I, for one, did not know many places to start or people to talk to begin oral history collection. My peers and I struggled a bit in the beginning framing our outreach strategies, and organizing introductory meetings. However, we were blessed with the network of Cameron, as well as other well-connected peers in journalism, cinematography, and environmental science, among others. Utilizing the connections that they shared with us, we were able to form more organically grounded relationships with our interviewees and community members. More than that, we were able to build and do meaningful work from the baseline of trust, reputability, and reliability. At every step of the process, community members' input was infused into the Project, with careful awareness of how much power we each were assigning to ourselves.

This was one of my most keen gems from the whole assemblage. Though traditional academics will teach the art of pride in one's individual work and final products, oral history pushes back against those standards and encourages us—the interviewers, collectors, and otherwise vessels through which oral histories are diffused—to cast our pride onto the stories of our subjects. It proved somewhat difficult, having come from a public policy background, where I took a lot of pride in proposing the best policy alternatives, posed the best equity considerations, or wrote the best whitepaper or addendum. Oral history allowed

me to step outside of myself and my considerations of the world as I know it, and allowed me to fully immerse myself in the perspective of someone else.

This felt like it was achieved for me once I had conducted my first in-person oral history at the Piney Woods/Free Union community. Getting to sit in the church, the weight of the place's history, its rich community of people, their struggles and joys, and the amalgamation of all that had passed through the place and all that is yet to come for it. It reminded me so much of my hometown on the Outer Banks, where my ancestors' careful maintenance of and struggle for the land that is theirs is felt on every corner of the small island. In both places, I feel the weightiness of what it means for the dwindling population of people that remain. Being tactile with the place, the people, the environment all helped me to center the true subjects of the oral histories. It grounded my work in the oral history space and, like many other experiences in this course, reinvigorated my passion for environmental justice.

Cameron did an excellent job communicating consistently throughout the semester. As an inter-institutional student with no prior knowledge of the inner workings of Duke student interfaces, this communication was invaluable to me. I was kept in the loop via personal email messages and copies, as well as standard Duke Sakai automations. Moreover, during Fall semester, I was accommodated with the option of online-only attendance in class, which helped me greatly, as I live nearly 30 minutes away from Duke's campus and had a full class load. Even more, during Spring semester, I was paired with another student living far from campus, and we met weekly (if not twice weekly) during the first few weeks over Zoom. We discussed class materials, progress in our outreach to community members, and our comfortability with oral history creation.

I was incredibly grateful for the ways in which the class was carried out and appreciate the facilitators for all of their hard work in ensuring the course was as accessible and informative as possible.

It's important that I bring to light a few things that I felt didn't work so well. As I expressed in previous paragraphs, I felt like the class was carried out with equal parts rigor and accommodation, all subjective to my experience as a distance learner. I say this as a primer as I move into discussing any issues I experienced throughout the course so that all is contextualized. One of the few difficulties I experienced in this course was a general lack of camaraderie and relationship building. Being apart from campus isolated me a bit in my experience of navigating the course structurally, as well as emotionally. I sincerely appreciated the relationships I fostered over Zoom and during our trip to Piney Woods, and don't intend this feedback as neglect of that unique opportunity. The course was difficult in nature to take from a distance, as I learned new ways of collecting "data" as it were, and began expanding my network within the realm of environmental justice.

Among the many things that I learned in this course, as alluded to in previous paragraphs, is the concept of *due diligence*. It is one easily discounted. I admit, with much chagrin, that my undergraduate courses did not set a great example for thoroughness. Between being given short deadlines, and expectations of speaking with experts on topics once or twice for class projects and papers, it's no surprise that the pivot to long-term relationships as well as long-term projects was difficult. However, it was the most valuable thing that I could have learned. Most rewarding of all lessons in this course was the iterative process of outreach, confirmation, and sometimes starting over, but following through nevertheless.

Another lesson learned was that of *creative agency*. Despite the focus of the oral histories being on the individual community members and their lived experiences, I learned that it was okay for my interests to guide a conversation as it flowed naturally. For example, in my interview with the Keyes siblings, I inquired about how Ann and William met, because the formation and maintenance of strong Black families has always been something I love to hear about, especially from my elders. Moreover, their story informed the bigger picture of the oral history interview as a case study in environmental justice, given strong family units and their strong connections to land, place, and history.

It's difficult to envision what I *could* have learned from this course, but I'm hopeful that for future classes, other lessons might be infused to supplement those that I already learned. I hope that future students will have their resilience fostered in the face of rejection and redirection. These two are difficult to navigate without help. Meshing a strong class that understands each other's' backgrounds, strengths, and desires will certainly help build the camaraderie and enhance this process. I think that students should also have *even more* agency over who they're doing outreach to for interviews. Though students in the course certainly did do outreach on their own, at times I felt that Cameron and/or the instructors were carrying the burden of outreach (though some was founded, given my peers and I's limited networks). I felt like if students could take more initiative about learning who their interviewee/community is, from that person/community. Attending the sermon at our trip to Piney Woods definitely helped me realize that desire, and more than that—need. For some of my peers, it was their first time in a church, much less a Black Baptist church. It's important to have a framework of proprioception from which to move into oral history collection.

I'm so grateful for the entire Bass Connections team for letting me in on this project, and entrusting me with the scribes of environmental justice history. Trusting people with the voices of our communities to elevate and advocate at the highest levels is hope. At the core of environmental justice principles is resilience.

A quote that I think about often, even as a Muslim woman, is a Bible quote spoken originally by Rev. William Barber II at a conference last Spring, as he spoke about justice and power: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matthew 23:23). In this movement, we cannot leave our fate alone to tax-collectors, entity interests, and those for whom conflicting capital interests will taint the potency of our communities’ work on the pathway to environmental justice.