

NHU'S EJOHP REFLECTIONS

B.B.C. (Before Bass Connections)

I first joined this project because I saw it while I was randomly perusing opportunities posted on DukeList. Immediately, I was struck with how closely in line this project was with virtually every part of my academic interests. I am an Environmental Science and Policy major, and the issues surrounding environmental justice and racism had interested me since I began working with the Sierra Club and with my local Citizens' Environmental Coalition in high school. In particular, I was excited about the potential opportunity to learn more about environmental justice issues in my own community, since I'm from Houston, Texas, and this project was focusing on the American South. Furthermore, as an English major, I was particularly drawn to the storytelling aspect of the project, both in terms of the nature of oral histories but also in terms of how the outputs/deliverables of the project were being described. I was fascinated by the idea of oral history collection because it was a research method that was entirely unfamiliar to me at the time, and it challenged my idea of what research could be. Beforehand, I had not known much about alternative research methods that were not quantitative or based on the traditional scientific method.

I submitted my application quickly, and I'm so glad I did so. I was accepted onto the team as one of the founding members, and I got the pleasure of working quite closely with Cameron and taking on some unique roles and responsibilities because we were still forming the conception of the project. As I think back to this time now, I can truly appreciate the project that we've made. It's extremely difficult to pioneer new research methods – or at least pioneer in the sense that I and practically all the other undergraduates were not familiar with oral history collection. I watched (and like to think contributed) as Cameron sorted out how to train a small group of individuals on not only how to collect oral histories but also how to do so thoughtfully, ethically, and responsibly. And then, how to create products based on those oral histories that were similarly ethical as well as accessible.

During this time, I would say that the majority of the issues that came up derived from difficulties with clarity, accountability, and dedication. It's inevitable with new projects, especially with projects as flexible and subjective as this one, that things will not be super clear and organized – I fault no leadership, especially Cameron, for this issue. We were all trying to figure out what we wanted to do and then focusing that on what we could do, limited by time, resources, and manpower. That brings me onto the other issues: that without a course or work-study, the project generally lacked accountability mechanisms, which in turn led to a significant range of levels of dedication across all those involved in the project. Without the threat of low grades or loss of income to encourage students to complete assignments or show up to meetings, it can be difficult to keep busy college students engaged. I'll admit that even I struggled with keeping myself accountable at times.

However, I don't think that this is necessarily an issue that needs to be eradicated, as I personally found and continue to find the flexibility and understanding of the project and all those involved to be a necessary component of ensuring that this experience is a positive one. It allows my work

with the EJOHP to be something I do willingly and wholeheartedly whenever I can, and not just because I have to. Thus, if I were to go back and change anything, it would likely be to input mechanisms that would provide students with greater structure so that things are more manageable and less than full independence is necessary to be a functioning member of the team. As a busy college student with a lot on my plate but still one with a desire to help and to learn about environmental justice, I know that if this were not my top priority, it would be very helpful to have smaller, more specific tasks and assignments over time. Having larger, ambitious goals with no clear road to reaching them is extremely daunting for someone who's never done anything like collect oral histories or write narrative articles before. In this regard, I think transforming this project into a Bass Connections team and taking advantage of the structure and accountability measures that come from it was a great idea.

Oral Histories

Unfortunately, I was abroad in the fall semester and was not able to participate in any of the events or work. However, I was kept in the loop by Cameron via email, and due to my prior participation in the project, I was able to jump back in when I returned to campus in the spring. I was right on time for the start of the actual collection of oral histories! This was extremely nerve-wracking. As much as I tried to catch up on past recordings, lectures, and readings, I didn't feel like anything could prepare me for actually speaking to a person and drawing out the kind of information that we wanted. I was afraid of not getting anything useful out of the interview, of forgetting questions or asking the wrong ones, or worse of all, accidentally offending someone. If I've learned anything during my time in college, it's that it's truly impossible to be "fully informed."

Just my luck – because of who I had signed up to conduct an oral history with, I was on track to do the very first one with Alexander Easdale, the executive director of the Southeast Climate & Energy Network. Being the first meant that there would be no other undergraduate to talk to about their experience and no previous recording to look back on myself, and that terrified me. Luckily, Cameron offered to be there with me and lead the interview so I could watch and learn how it was done. It ended up being a wonderful experience and put me so much at ease because I learned that these oral histories, at their best, were truly just conversations between someone with relevant experience and someone with genuine curiosity. I approached my next oral history assignment, with Appalachian Voices director Rory McIlmoil (who has since transitioned jobs), the same way, and it similarly turned out very well.

It was very fun and interesting to conduct the oral histories as someone who aims to work in the field of environmental advocacy in the future. Something that I've always been intimidated about when it comes to advocacy and activism is that we've all been taught very extraordinary examples of activism. We're taught about great leaders and shown nothing but the faces of movements, from Rosa Parks to Greta Thunberg, and little else. This inadvertently created a very limited subconscious conception about what activism and activists looked like. However, speaking with Alexander and Rory exposed me to a greater range of advocates. Even though they are also very impressive (and in some ways intimidating) individuals, I learned through our conversation that advocates can come in every occupation and from every background. And

more importantly, I got a better sense of what advocacy looks like. Rather than simply being the voices who deliver profound speeches to audiences of millions, the work of advocates that analyze data and unite organizations are just as crucial to movements as large and complex as environmentalism.

Doing the transcripts has definitely been the hard part, one which I've put off for far too long, I'll admit. The easy part was putting together the template and instructions sheet, which I did of my own volition to support the uniformity and professionalism of the project, as well as just to make everyone else's lives a little easier. The process of transcribing itself is not something that I have much to comment on as far as how it's shaped my views on advocacy and environmentalism, but I do want to mention some other benefits that those tasks have had on my skills and development because it's fun. As mentioned, I'm an English major, and one of my main interests as an English major has been drama and dramatic writing. In fact, I'm hoping to write a play as my Creative Distinction project for the English major. Working on the transcripts has been extremely informative in learning how people talk. It's really interesting to think about the difference between something like Shakespeare, realistic fiction that incorporates verisimilitude, and writing these transcripts of real people having real conversations. I'll say, it's been a good exercise in realizing how the human mind works and how that translates into dialogue during a conversation – every um, uh, and like included.

Piney Woods

Another part of the project that I was very glad to come back in time for was the visit to Piney Woods. I was not there for the visit during the first semester, so I was quite nervous for this one – as you can tell, there's definitely a trend in my emotions approaching every aspect of this project. Either way, I decided to go and was extremely glad that I did so. I attended my very first church service (I was raised Buddhist), and I was able to work with Ameena Hester on conducting oral histories with multiple groups – family members that wanted to do the interview together. It was really encouraging to see how welcoming the community was to us students and how enthusiastic they were about helping us with our project. It rained that day, but that was still not enough to dampen our spirits!

I told William some of my reflections after the day was over, but I'll reiterate them here: it was so interesting to hear about people's recollections, especially the older community members, because of how it relates to the history that we've been taught in classrooms. Out there, in the community, although we were learning about the past, it didn't feel like the past because it came from someone with whom that "past" is a part of their lived experiences that impacts their lives today. I remember one woman, whose name I unfortunately cannot remember at present, telling us about how she brought a black coworker of hers home to Piney Woods and how that coworker was flabbergasted at the prospect of so many African American families being historic landowners. I realized that it shocked me to; I had been taught a dominant narrative about black Americans in the United States, one that centered around slavery and the oppression of black people. It pushed aside narratives of black success and community, like those evident among members of the Piney Woods Free Union community. I feel so lucky to be a part of the work that helps to carry that legacy on. As Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, "The single

story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they aren't true, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Thus, the visit to Piney Woods also prompted me to reflect on my own identity and background. All day, I listened to stories from people whose families had lived in the same area for centuries, people whose roots ran way deep in Piney Woods. In a way, that made me sad when I thought about my own identity and family. I am a first-generation immigrant, the daughter of two Vietnamese American immigrants that came here when they were children. My parents were born in Vietnam, their parents were born in Vietnam, and so on. They've only been living in the place that I consider the only home I've ever known for a few decades, not a few centuries. My community is just beginning to make their mark on the space that they now occupy and to shape that space. As I listened to the Piney Woods community members express their gratitude in seeing more black people in their local and national governments representing them, I thought about the dearth of Asian Americans in government or most other public spaces in American culture. This isn't necessarily an issue or anyone's fault, but I will say that the experience has motivated me to think more critically about incorporating my identity into my work and research and to try to find ways to maybe work with the Asian American community. Those opportunities have not been super common in my academic career thus far, especially in the field of environmentalism here in North Carolina.

[Lightning Talk & Showcase](#)

Finally, I would say that the culmination of the year came with the Fortin Foundation Showcase in mid-April. Along with Meghna and Victoria, I was one of the lightning talk speakers representing the project at the showcase. We worked together in the weeks leading up to the showcase developing a script, creating the slides, and attending multiple meetings and rehearsals. (Some of the meetings, led by showcase organizers, I and my fellow speakers did not find very helpful.) With only five minutes to encapsulate a year of work (two years if you're counting the time before it became a Bass Connections, which I am), we had to think critically about what details were necessary to do the project justice and create a comprehensive picture of our endeavors for our audience. I took the beginning third of the presentation and introduced the environmental justice movement as well as the project.

Overall, participating in the lightning talks and the showcase was a very rewarding experience. Many of my friends that I had invited came by the booth and stayed for the show, and it was fun to introduce them to the work that I had been doing and the products we had come up with. However, what was even more fun was interacting with people that I did not know but that were nonetheless interested in our project. It made me reflect on when I was in their position, unfamiliar with oral histories, how to collect them, and what they can mean for the people who participate.

[A.B.C. \(After Bass Connections\)](#)

I'm extremely grateful for all the experiences that I've been able to have as a part of this project, and I know that my involvement does not end here. I didn't include a section in this reflection because I started quite late due to my semester abroad, but I am also writing one of the articles

that we hope to be published as a part of the environmental justice anniversary series. I am working with Angella Dunston to interview three people, including her, Dollie Burwell, and a (currently unidentified) younger advocate in order to tell the story of the connections between movements and activists. They all inspire one another, just as I have been inspired by my work with the EJOHP. I hope to complete a draft early this summer, right after I finish with the third interview, and to publish it at the earliest opportunity possible.

Furthermore, although I'm still working with Cameron and Miguel on this, earlier in the semester I floated the idea of doing another showcase, specifically focused on the EJOHP project. I want to create something like a museum exhibit to highlight the work that we've done by transforming it into a physical experience that visitors can have, physically moving through the stories of leaders and advocates as they are emotionally moved. This is still in the early stages of development and an ambitious undertaking, but it's a sincere goal that I have that is based on my interest in alternative forms of storytelling – hence my interest in oral history in the first place. It would feature audio clips, video clips, images, text quotes, and more to immerse visitors in the stories that we have collected over the past year.

No matter what happens, like whether or not the showcase is feasible and ends up happening, I hope to stay involved with this project as long as I can. I truly believe that the work we have done is extremely important and needs to be carried on for as long as possible. There are infinite stories that deserve to be told and preserved for future generations, and Duke, being the wealthy and powerful institution that it is, is positioned in a unique place to serve that function for those that have faced injustice and racism – or anyone that has a story to tell beyond the realm of civil rights and environmentalism. Perhaps one day I can be one of the advocates interviewed by a nervous, young Duke undergraduate conducting their very first oral history, telling them about how my journey began right here.