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Final Reflection

Preparation, Summer '22

I entered this project with little to no knowledge on the environmental justice movement, so I was extremely relieved that there were required readings that contextualized the movement. *Dumping in Dixie* helped me understand the deep roots of the movement and the discriminatory impacts that zoning legislation has had on low-income, BIPOC, rural communities. Catherine Coleman Flowers' book was a change of pace from the research, information heavy *Dumping in Dixie*, and it felt more like an autobiography than a book about the environmental justice movement. Either way, I enjoyed reading about Catherine Coleman Flowers' activist journey from student to teacher to advocate. Finally, *Toxic Communities* was a bit hard to wade through, but I eventually managed to finish, and I'm glad I did. Personally, I think this book should have been required and *Waste* should have been optional, solely based on comparing the information density of the two. *Toxic Communities* was the basis on which I based my summer research essay since a section of the book detailed racially restrictive housing ordinances in Baltimore City, a ten-minute drive from my hometown.

I loved the process of researching an environmental justice close to my home since it gave me the opportunity to apply my learning to a neighborhood close to my heart, specifically the one in which my dad works. At the beginning, I wasn't sure where to start. I was so new to the movement that I felt ill-equipped to identify one problem of the decidedly many there are in my hometown and surrounding areas. Eventually, I discovered the EPA database of Superfund sites and spent an entire afternoon comparing the ones close to me. I eventually settled on the Kane and Lombard Street Drums site for numerous reasons. This Superfund Site, which is also on the National Priority List, is located less than a mile from my father's workplace and less than a mile from a high school, Patterson High School. This school has a minority population of 93.4%, 3% mathematics proficiency, 2% reading proficiency, and 0% science proficiency. In addition, 59% of students are economically disadvantaged. I wanted to dedicate my time in this Bass Connection speaking with the students and staff at this school to see if they were aware of the Superfund site in their school's backyard and how racism, environmental or otherwise, affects their life.

I did an immense amount of research on the Kane and Lombard Street Drums site. I read all the resources available on the EPA's database, including an administrative settlement agreement and record of decision. These resources helped me understand the health risks to humans, flora, and fauna and actions already taken by the EPA to mitigate the harms posed by the site. Reading these sources helped me get acquainted with certain terms used in the field such as human health risk assessment surveys, reasonable maximum exposure, contaminants of concern, and ecological risk assessment.

In my issue proposal, I acknowledged that Baltimore, Maryland is not what most imagine when they hear the words "American South." I explained that the community in which Kane and Lombard Street Drums is located, Bayview, is racially mixed, issues arise when you zoom closer into the site and examine the demographics of Patterson High School. I explained the EPA's distinction of the site into two operable units, one of which achieved complete remediation in 1991 and has since been repurposed into a golf driving range. Referencing Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie*, I mention wanting to connect with the community to see if they feel as if Bayview Golf

Center has environmentally blackmailed them to accept the health risks associated with operable unit two, which remains on the National Priority List and exposes construction and industrial workers to exposure to contaminants. One of these industrial workers at risk is my stepfather, who works at a steel processing plant less than a mile away from operable unit two. I walked into the first semester of this project eager to connect with my community and give them space to tell their stories and voice their worries.

First Semester, Fall '22

The first semester was a time for learning, listening, and experiencing. There were numerous events on campus celebrating 40 years of environmental justice, referencing the Warren County marches that sparked the environmental justice movement in September of 1982. I was ecstatic to attend the 40th anniversary march at Warren County, and it is to date the most rewarding experience I've had at Duke. I mentioned in my event reflection that I'm not a particularly religious or spiritual person, but I felt the power of God that day when we all bowed our heads in prayer. It would be this community, I remember thinking, that would spark something so powerful with the strength of their belief and care for one another. When we marched, I tried to focus on every one of my five senses, completely engulfing myself in the moment. I screamed along with the chants, sang along with the songs, and joined in conversation with a kind old man who told us about a wildfire that once ravaged the same road we were walking on.

Of course, the moment that impacted me the most came after the march when generations old, young, and in-between gathered and danced to "Run the World (Girls) by Beyoncé. This moment was one of community, of humanity, of resilience, of strength, of pure joy. I wouldn't trade it for all the money in the world, and I would do anything to go back and feel that happiness and sense of community again.

I attended as many of the "Celebrating 40 Years of Environmental Justice" events as I could, and I appreciated how they contextualized the movement for me and showed the many sides and disciplines that an environmental justice advocate may have.

In my mid-semester outline, I affirmed my commitment to collecting oral histories from the Bayview area of Baltimore, Maryland, and I supplemented my summer research with a deeper dive into Baltimore's perception as an area of dangerous, violent crime. Baltimore citizens deserve to be seen as more than drug addicts and victims of gun violence. I noted in my mid-semester outline draft that I wanted to give Baltimoreans a platform to tell their stories, whether or not that reproduced stereotypes or not. Specifically, I mentioned a need to be deliberate and delicate while striking the balance between feeding into and combating stereotypes of life in the city. My email template for contacting members of the community began with a short introduction, the purpose of the project, and my connection to the city. I then proposed the focus of the project, Kane and Lombard Street Drums, and encouraged the recipient to ask for more information if they were at all interested in participating. If they wanted to speak to me personally, I offered an option to either Zoom call or meet in person when I returned home for winter break. In addition, I had a more personal email draft that I intended to use for contacts that my dad provided me since he works in the city, used to live there, and has many friends who still do. This draft operated off the assumption that my dad had told them a bit about the project, so I restated the main goal and asked if they had any questions and/or wanted to meet either via Zoom or in-person.

There weren't many differences between my mid-semester outline draft and my final research outline since I was very sick for most of fall semester and struggled to complete assignments between doctor's visits. Most notably, I had already contacted a few administrators at Patterson High School and members of Baltimore City's zoning committee, so I included the exact language I used in those research drafts. I also mentioned my plans to visit the site over Spring break to get a closer look at the surrounding businesses and Patterson High School.

In the beginning of November, we had an oral history workshop hosted by the UNC Southern Oral History Program. Although I had participated in an oral history project in the past, I learned a lot from their presentation and explanations, specifically the distinctions between what an oral history is and what it isn't. I hadn't truly conceptualized oral history as a research method before, but this session helped me understand its importance and research significance, especially applied to the goal of our project. The leaders of the training explained that there are two main types of oral history interviews: the life story and the topical interview. Upon reflecting, I believe that I collected a mix of both over the process of this project. I also appreciated the ending part of the training that gave us broad subjects – early life, teenage years, protests – and gave us space to draft questions that fall under the respective categories. This made the training feel like it gave us the skills that we needed to take the knowledge forward and apply it in our future work.

The interview guide was definitely my favorite assignment of the year since it allowed me to take everything I learned from our training and my research and put it into practice. I began the document with pre-interview protocols that would ideally set the narrator at ease and make them feel like the environment was open-minded, accepting, and flexible. My pre-interview protocols placed emphasis on building rapport with the interviewee and allowing them to ask whatever questions they needed to before the interview started. The explanation and signing of informed consent documents would also take place before the interview. During the interview, I emphasized the importance of asking for clarification when needed and offering the narrator bathroom and water breaks if the interview goes on for more than forty-five minutes. After the interview, I stressed that I must express gratitude for the narrator taking time out of their day to sit down and speak with me. In addition, I explained how the next steps should be clearly explained to the narrator so that they know what to expect of the whole process – transcribing, editing, etc. A few days after the interview, I planned on sending a follow-up email reiterating my appreciation and summarizing the next steps to give the interviewee a written version they can refer back to.

My outreach strategy, submitted at the end of the first semester, detailed various ways that I intended on connecting with the community to preserve the oral histories I planned on collecting. I had two potential avenues of connection: nonprofit organizations in the city or the school system. At the time of this assignment, I was leaning more towards the school system, particularly places like Patterson High School, CCBC, and University of Baltimore. I felt that these partnerships would be best for the overall goal of this project: to collect oral histories and give them back to be housed in the affected communities. Ideally, I would speak directly to an environmental science class at Patterson High School at the end of the year to explain what a Superfund site is, what Kane and Lombard Street Drums is, and how we can use community organizing to demand action on operable unit two. If I were to enter a community partnership with a nonprofit, it would have to be after the first oral histories were collected to see what patterns and structural inequalities emerged. My main focus of the outreach strategy was to

ensure that the research coming from Baltimore remained housed in Baltimore where it would permanently be accessible for all students, regardless of education level or economic status.

The structure of these assignments – the mid- and end-of-semester outlines, interview guide, and outreach strategy – helped keep me on track with my personal oral history project. I find that I work best when I have a steady schedule to discipline me, which is why this first semester was much more productive than the second.

Second Semester, Spring ‘23

The second semester of this course was much different from what I expected. Based on our focus in the first semester, I imagined that our class time would turn to collecting oral histories from the communities we had been researching since the summertime. I was surprised when I realized that a predetermined list of environmental justice advocates had already been curated for us to interview. Of course, I adored the opportunity to speak with such accomplished, passionate individuals, but it completely took my focus away from the plans I made for my own oral history project in Baltimore. After dedicating a semester to establishing a strong foundation for the research, I was disheartened to find that our focus had completely shifted. I wish that we had been made aware of this at the beginning of the first semester or had been given an option to opt out of the environmental justice advocates in lieu of pursuing our own personal projects. I certainly could have pursued both at the same time, but I’ve done oral history work in the past, and I know how long the transcription and editing process takes.

Overall, this semester was extremely backloaded. It felt like we went from not doing much for the first two months of the semester to trying to do everything all at once. Sometimes, I worried that our eyes were bigger than our stomachs, and I stressed about our ability to get everything done in an efficient, ethical manner. It felt like a sprint for the finish line, between transcribing the environmental justice advocate oral histories, preparing for the end of year showcase, and drafting the five-page reflection. Luckily, due dates have been flexible, particularly for the transcripts, but I’m still pretty sad that all the work I did preparing for my Baltimore oral histories slipped through the cracks between the demands of the other oral histories and aspects of the project.

Out of the oral histories I collected, most were the life story ones that I’m pretty used to with talkative narrators excited to have the platform to tell their stories. When collecting these oral histories, the most I have to do is employ my active listening skills and bide my time to ask pointed, direct follow-up questions to continue the flow of conversation. One of the oral histories, however, was particularly challenging because it was from an academic advocate rather than a social justice advocate, which was a bit intimidating for me. She was less hesitant to reveal details about her childhood, where I usually begin my questions, and her journey into environmental justice work. The beginning of the oral history was very stunted, and I talked much more than I would have liked. Eventually, she began to open up a bit more when the topic of conversation strayed to her career and academic interests and pursuits. I would recommend, in the future, that the interviewers prepare two different sets of interview guides: one that begins at childhood – where do you consider home? What was your family like – and another one that begins later in life – what do you do for a career? How did you get into that line of work? If I had a second interview guide as a safety net, I would have been able to smoothly adjust my line of questioning and focus more of our time on what she was more willing to discuss.

Preparing for the lightning talk at the Fortin Foundation Bass Connections Showcase was probably my favorite part of the year because it combined two of the things I love the most:

presenting and sharing my work with others. Meghna, Nhu, and I made a great team. I've worked with both of them separately in the past, and I couldn't have asked for two better people to have completed this assignment with. I helped design the structure of the presentation, Meghna chose the slide theme and transferred my structure into a beautiful product, Nhu polished the slides with engaging transitions, and we each wrote our respective scripts. I wish we would have had longer than five minutes since there's so much more I wish we could have talked about – the summer work we completed before first semester, the talks from environmental justice powerhouses, the community we formed over the year.

At the showcase, I loved seeing everything come together – from the original Story+ that formed the ethical frameworks for the project to the Union Hill oral histories planned for this summer. Although I didn't prepare to present at our trifold, I ended up speaking to a lot of my friends who came to watch the lightning talks. I talked to them about what an oral history is and why it was our chosen research method for this project. At one point, a man came over and asked me to elaborate on a particularly emotional moment that I encountered during my oral history collection. I told him about one of the men I interviewed who grew up in the Jim Crow era South. This man had some trouble opening up to me at first, but he started to show vulnerability when discussing a time his mother took him to work with her. He said his mother worked for a wealthy white family across town, and she sent him to play with the family's young son while she worked. When he saw the son's room, he told me that he remembered wondering why this kid had so much when he had so little.

This moment is one of so many special, impactful moments that litter every single oral history. While working with this project, I also partnered with the Hamilton Hood foundation to assist them in their oral history project, and both of these experiences taught me so much about what an oral history is. They cannot be confined to a single definition because all oral histories have one thing in common, life, and life itself cannot be defined. Even when narrators speak of lost loved ones, they speak of them in terms of the life they lived and the legacy they left behind. Oral history is life, and the environmental justice movement seeks to preserve and improve life. I hope the work we've done will be used to seek and honor the lives that have not been given the same platform for preservation as others.