Radical Roots

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The following edited conversation began as a working group at the November 2017 National Humanities Conference. We all teach at urban universities in the broad realm of public history and share a similar commitment to social justice pedagogy. We each have a different position within the academy—as tenure track and non–tenure track faculty, academic administrators, and a librarian—but we have a common interest in experiential learning. Our students work with community organizations on projects that respond to current political and social contexts. At our conference session, where we were joined by Heidi Cramer, assistant director for public services for the Newark Public Library, we shared our projects and talked about the discoveries and pitfalls that we encountered in planning, development, and implementation. Several key themes and questions emerged.

First, what do we even mean by the term radical? In many universities it is radical simply to believe in the potential of history and creativity to ignite positive change and to create opportunities for students to learn with and from nonacademic partners. This perspective tends to privilege the impact of our work on our institutions, our disciplines, and our students. But “radical” pedagogy should have broader significance. As educators, we have personal and political orientations that don’t conveniently shut off when we are practicing our professions. Each of us has shared inquiry and interpretation with students and community members whose political beliefs are sharply at odds
with our own. The negotiation and dialogue this requires is not detrimental to our projects; it is essential. We believe that honoring the messiness of humanity is a core value of the humanities. At the same time, it is crucial to practice humility when we imagine the value of our work to collaborators, stakeholders, and audiences. As public humanists, we bring particular skills to any task, including those related to archival study, critical pedagogy, oral history, theory, and analysis. But we must wield our scholarly authority lightly, if at all. Ultimately, we have all learned that people, particularly those who are continuously marginalized, ignored, violated, and drowned out, need us to listen far more than they need us to demonstrate our expertise. Recognizing and honoring that is radical.

Second, how do we do this work sustainably? All of us have embarked on long-term partnerships with community organizations. Generally speaking, universities don’t actively support these kinds of partnerships, so how do we navigate university bureaucracies to get what we need for ourselves, our students, and our community partners? How do we create frameworks and processes that allow us to continue to do such work without reinventing the wheel every semester?

A major part of our job is managing relationships with and between at least two different groups: students and community partners. We have worked with undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom have had little knowledge or direct experience with the communities with whom we are working. As a result, we have had to temper our expectations regarding student engagement and learning, and that has shaped our approaches to both pedagogy and project management. We all agree that students must think of themselves as partners working with community members, not as experts who are informing communities about their own history and its meaning. Conflicts about terminology, memory, and perspective have spurred each of us to become especially reflexive about our teaching.

From the perspective of our community partners, we are representatives of our universities. Why do these partners trust us, especially when our universities have been catalysts for displacement and gentrification in their neighborhoods? Most of us agree that they trust us because we act in good faith. We listen. We work collaboratively. We don’t steamroll. But even in the best marriage, there are going to be disagreements and hostilities. How do we deal with that? How do we handle the emotional toll of managing these partnerships?
Finally, it is notable that we are all women taking part in this conversation. This represents the continued problematic feminization of relationship management and emotional labor—one that historians working with the public and in the academy need to address.

The Projects

Denise D. Meringolo

DM: Preserve the Baltimore Uprising is a crowdsourced digital collection that enables local people to upload images, oral histories, audio files, video, and other materials directly to an Omeka-based website. I was driven by a sense of urgency to design the project over the course of a rushed weekend in April 2015. The national media was portraying protests and acts of civil disobedience in Baltimore as a “riot,” minimizing the justified outrage of local residents who assembled to protest the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. I feared that the motivations, desires, ideas, and demands of people in the streets would be mischaracterized, minimized, and lost to history. I created the digital project as a way to make sure that the protesters could control their own message. And I modeled the site after projects like Documenting Ferguson and A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland.

Dipti Desai

DD: The Community Book of Wellbeing was a collaborative project between our graduate students in the Research in Art + Education course at New York University in partnership with the Commission on Public Health Systems in New York City, an organization that advocates for people’s right to access health care. We were interested in using the arts to envision new ways of working within community settings to inspire dialogue about issues of concern to the community in order to initiate social change.

This collaboration examined the way people in the Lower East Side and Chinatown neighborhoods of Manhattan see health and wellness in their lives and communities. We used art and other creative methods to collect stories from people in the Lower East Side and Chinatown
regarding well-being. What is a healthy body? What does a healthy community or neighborhood look like? The Commission on Public Health Systems was interested in collecting stories in order to understand people’s beliefs regarding wellness. Their ultimate goal was to advocate for changing public health policies, as existing policies do not meet the needs of many marginalized communities and many do not use public health services.

Our students facilitated several art workshops with elderly women at the University Settlement House to discuss well-being. In one session, they showed contemporary artworks to facilitate discussion about how the women understood well-being. In another session, participants drew or wrote on body maps to help them locate the places they felt discomfort and pain, as well as places they felt strong and healthy. This led to a lively conversation about home remedies from their cultures. They worked together to create a printed book about stories of well-being that included home remedies for various health problems that could be distributed to health clinics and ultimately inform public health policy.

Rebecca Amato

RA: The semester-long, undergraduate, community-engaged research course I teach at New York University is called (Dis)Placed Urban Histories. It is built on a partnership with the community-based organization Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) in the South Bronx.

Each year, our project takes a different form, but it is always history-based, always connected to neighborhood change, and always produced for the South Bronx community itself rather than a university audience. The work we do as a class is determined by WHEDco, though limited by the constraints of time and structure imposed by a semester. In spring 2017, our project was to create a digital archive and exhibit using the digital platform Omeka and to install a real-life exhibit that highlighted items from the archive. At the core of the exhibit were oral histories that students conducted with residents and workers who had a long engagement with Melrose, the South Bronx neighborhood we were studying. We recorded 19 oral histories and digitized and photographed
Students and residents visit the temporary exhibit at Boricua College in Melrose. The exhibit included biographical images, quotations, and materials donated to the class for documentation and display through both the digital and physical exhibits. Photographs by Rebecca Amato.
over 150 personal items from our collaborators. Dozens of residents visited the physical exhibit, which was on display at predominantly Puerto Rican Boricua College at its Bronx location. The final Omeka archive and exhibit has been used by WHEDco for planning reports and other materials intended to represent the neighborhood’s interests in meetings with New York City officials, particularly around rezoning. In spring 2018, we mined the oral histories to identify places of significance to the local community, researched the sites, and created a Clio-based multimedia walking tour that invites residents to explore new pathways in their own neighborhood. This tour was integrated into the unveiling of the Bronx Commons and Bronx Music Hall in 2019, a mixed-use site that was proposed by a community plan more than twenty years ago. All the materials that came out of the partnership are now on the WHEDco website.

Mary Rizzo

MR: In fall 2016, students in my graduate seminar Place, Community and Public Humanities at Rutgers University–Newark partnered with the Newark Public Library, an advisory group made up of academic and community scholars, and an undergraduate class in Spanish and Portuguese studies to produce the exhibition *From Rebellion to Review Board: Newark Fights for Police Accountability*. Our topic was the long struggle for police accountability fought by generations of diverse activists in the city. It was timely. The Black Lives Matter movement had started a national conversation on police brutality in response to the killings of unarmed people of color by the police. Closer to home, two events happened. The Newark city council created a Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) with supervisory power over the police. The city of Newark signed a consent decree with the Department of Justice for federal monitoring of the police after a report showed discriminatory policing practices. I was particularly interested in the creation of the CCRB. When the media covered it, they often talked about it in relation primarily to Black Lives Matter. In reality, Newark activists had been pushing for a civilian review board since the 1950s. All this made the topic ripe for a graduate-level public history class and an exhibition that would trace the history of police accountability.
Prior to the semester’s start, I developed three sets of collaborative relationships. I reached out to Heidi Cramer at the Newark Public Library about a partnership. The library’s New Jersey room and the Hispanic Research and Information Center had significant archival holdings documenting activism. The library also agreed to host the completed exhibition. I utilized contacts at Rutgers and in Newark to...
identify people for a community advisory board who would ensure that the exhibit was factually correct and that it addressed community concerns. Finally, the undergraduate class worked on a complementary exhibit, *Accion Latina*, on Latinx “riots” in New Jersey entirely in Spanish. Both exhibits opened in December 2016 at the library.

Working with the historiography of Newark, the archivists, and the advisors, we devised three sections for the exhibit. The first would
cover the lead up to and aftermath of the Newark rebellion, the civil disturbance that took place in Newark in July 1967. This mainly involved African American history. The second looked at the lead up to and aftermath of the 1974 Puerto Rican “riot” in Newark. Much less well known than the 1967 incident, there was little published material on it. Instead, my students used oral histories and archival sources to examine coalition building between Black and Puerto Rican activists in Newark, which led to the election of the first Black mayor of Newark, Ken Gibson, in 1970. The final section looked at the War on Drugs. How had the War on Drugs increased police surveillance over Black neighborhoods and, especially, young people? This section also dealt with overpolicing of the LGBTQ community by examining the murder of Defarra Gaymon, a Black man who was killed by Newark police while possibly cruising for sex in Branch Brook Park in 2010. His death ignited the LGBTQ community in New Jersey.

**Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani**

**GBV:** The Layered SPURA project was a five-year collaborative project between myself, more than fifty students in my regularly offered City Studio class at the New School, and several Lower East Side community-based organizations, primarily Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) and City Lore. The collaboration was initiated through an existing collaboration that GOLES, City Lore, and the Pratt Center had begun and from which they had built a coalition, called “SPURA Matters.”

The fourteen-square-block area of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area on Manhattan’s Lower East Side had been slated for demolition and “renewal” in 1967. For forty years, after buildings were demolished and almost two thousand families displaced—most of whom were people of low income and of color—very little had been built in the area. In that time, the site had been highly contested, often in bitter racially divisive community-level fights over affordable housing complicated by political corruption. The goal of the Layered SPURA project was to use art and public history practices to illuminate the many meanings of SPURA as a place, issuing a call to heed its history. In five years of community-based exhibitions, we sought to spur new dialogues to support a new planning process in which affordable
housing could be built and in which those displaced might finally realize their long-promised “right to return.”

The works in the exhibitions were cocreated by students and community members. The projects never suggested what a new plan might be—the neighborhood is weary of being told what to do—but rather used photographs, maps, oral histories, and tactile sculptural elements to present the SPURA site as a real place rather than as square footage of developable real estate. Over those five years, we exhibited in three different spaces: informal neighborhood spaces where people bumped into the work in the course of their daily lives and the more formal exhibition spaces of the Abrons Art Center at Henry Street Settlement and the Sheila Johnson Design Center at the New School. We also built partnerships with the Seward Park Area Redevelopment Coalition (SPARC), Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), and the Pratt Center for Community Development. I have written about the full evolution of the project and the SPURA site in my book, *Contested City*.1
The Students

**DM:** Until recently, my public history projects/courses were almost exclusively geared toward MA students who had opted for the public history track as part of their course of study. The Department of History created an undergraduate minor in public history in 2013, so now I teach a series of combined courses—upper-level undergraduate courses with a graduate section. Both graduate and undergraduate students are required to begin public history studies by taking an introductory course in which they learn about the values and essential methods of public history practice. I emphasize collaboration, shared inquiry, and shared interpretation, as well as historical research and writing. Students spend a significant amount of time analyzing the needs and interests of public history stakeholders and audiences, and examining relevant histories of the field, particularly those that have shaped historical landscapes, collections, and institutions. We also engage in lively discussions about the role public historians can—and often do—play in the realm of activism and advocacy. I often remind my students that public historians must be both responsible and responsive. We uphold the best practices of the discipline of history, and we actively include our audiences and stakeholders in processes of inquiry, research, and interpretation. Because our work stems from community relationships, we also strive for flexibility. We are attentive to the changing needs and interests of those we serve, and we can transform existing projects or begin new ones to address the social, political, or cultural environment. In order to practice these skills, we work with local partners on a variety of public history projects.

The challenge with public history education, however, is that there is little space between classroom-based theoretical exploration and real-world implementation. Students, accustomed to spending an entire semester working on a single paper, are sometimes daunted by the scope of research and compression of the time line necessary for producing even a fairly limited public history project. More seriously, however, my students struggle with issues related to power and privilege. First, many, particularly graduate students, resist embracing the notion of shared authority. They find it difficult to negotiate the space between “informing” an audience about the facts of history and
“engaging” an audience in a discussion where history is at the center. Second, many of my students are uncomfortable with the political dynamics of public history practice. While a core group of graduate students in my Introduction to Public History class developed the ethical underpinnings of *Preserve the Baltimore Uprising*, a small but vocal set of their classmates was uncomfortable with the project’s political position. Similarly—though perhaps less incendiary—other groups of students working to develop content for digital walking tours on the Explore Baltimore Heritage curatescape app have found it challenging to work in a collaborative fashion with the largely White, middle-aged, and elderly members of neighborhood associations and local historical groups. Some are reluctant to challenge our partners’ nostalgia while others want to crush it with a sledgehammer. Finally, I have come to realize that many of my students do not immediately understand or trust the value of project-based learning until after they graduate and begin working in the field. This distrust manifests in several ways. Some approach the classroom as an entirely theoretical space and put minimal effort into the project work. Others develop somewhat dismissive attitudes toward our project partners, producing content that is informative but not engaging. Some embrace the process of project-based learning, but they are not quite successful in project implementation.

The biggest challenge for me has been to arrive at some level of acceptance. Student resistance, skepticism, and struggle are all part of the learning process. Projects are not “finished” at the end of a given semester. Rather, they are begun. Similarly, it is often at the end of a semester—or even later—that students arrive at a deeper understanding of public history as a social process.

**MR:** I have the privilege of teaching MA students in history and American studies and PhD students in American studies. Even though all of my students are in graduate school, their depth of knowledge, background, and training differ widely. Some are training for a career in public history, while others are hoping to land academic jobs, and still others are happy in the jobs they have and are earning credits for extra credentials. Many of my students work full or part time while going to graduate school. Understanding this has changed my expectations for my classes. When I was a graduate student at the University of
Minnesota, you were expected to devote yourself full time to research, reading, and writing. For my students, this is unrealistic. If we’re serious about diversifying our graduate programs and the field of public history, then it’s unrealistic for all of us. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we can’t expect rigorous work from our students. We simply have to be flexible. For example, I learned that I couldn’t expect that my students would be able to visit local archives that are only open during the day, because they are at work. In my fall 2017 class, we used the Queer Newark Oral History Project, a born-digital audio archive, as our research base since these materials were available to everyone equally.

At the start of each semester, I tell the members of my class that they are both students in a graduate course and a collaborative team working together on a project. I try to model my classes as much as possible on how a team working together at a museum or nonprofit organization functions. On the first day, for example, I ask everyone to introduce themselves by giving their name, their program, and what special skills they have. I’ve had students tell me that their special skills are everything from being good at talking to strangers (an excellent skill when we’re planning community meetings) to video editing (this student created a video loop of archival footage for an exhibit) to everything in between. Since most of my students have not had any previous training in public history, my goal is to make them see that they each bring skills with them into our project. This is one way that public history training differs from academic history training. Academic history requires a narrow set of skills (research acumen, interpretative ability, and strong writing). Public historians work more broadly, so my classes become a way for students to explore their skills and figure out what kind of public history work might be best for them.

I’m not sure what assumptions my students bring to my classes, but I suspect that they don’t realize how much we will talk about process and how open our classroom will be to our community scholars and partners. Much class discussion time focuses on how we will take our research and translate it into an exhibit for public viewing. I emphasize that we’re creating a narrative and that every narrative is ideological—it expresses a particular world view. It leaves out as much as it includes. At the same time, we can’t let this paralyze us. We
need to meet deadlines. Our collaborators—who we call community scholars—are critical to this process. We meet with them throughout the semester and give them the opportunity to criticize early drafts of our work. Unfailingly, students are anxious about this. Having a professor critique them is familiar terrain, but when community scholars come into class, students get really nervous, because they are so concerned that they are going to get something wrong or disappoint them. This sense of responsibility to the community is probably the biggest learning experience of the class.

**RA:** I teach undergraduates at New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study, an interdisciplinary program in which students design their own majors. Since Gallatin’s core curriculum is composed of interdisciplinary seminars that are open to all undergraduate students at NYU, my course attracts students at all levels and from all disciplines. On the one hand, this means students come fresh to the topics I’m covering in class, so they are curious and eager to discuss our material. They also bring academic strengths in other areas into the class—creative writing, photography, ethnography, and literary analysis, among others—which encourages lively and wide-ranging discussion and provides useful skills for exhibit-making, while also keeping me on my toes.

On the other hand, I am constantly surprised by how little US history my students actually know. Placing a particular neighborhood’s history in context always requires more background research than I expect. Nearly every year at the midterm, I realize that some percentage of the students in my class never grasped what the terms urban renewal or deindustrialization or Great Society meant, despite my referring to them regularly. We usually spend an entire class meeting with a “Twenty Questions”–type review in which the students write anonymous questions about historical terms on index cards and I answer them for the group.

Anchoring students in history is one important way of focusing us all on the objectives of the class. Challenging their reliance on critical and political theory is another. Gallatin students are particularly well trained in high-level theory early in their college education, so it can be a challenge to bring them back into the realm of empirical
learning. As much as I embrace and am inspired by the works of theorists like Henri Lefebvre, Paulo Freire, and Antonio Gramsci, I often need to remind my students these thinkers insisted that knowledge exists in practice and in real encounters with actual people. It is not only in books or the classroom. For that reason, they are asked to approach their projects in our course, particularly collaborative oral histories, as opportunities to listen, not occasions to collect case studies to prove their own emerging philosophies.

When students enroll in my course, I think they are most excited to leave the classroom, talk about neighborhood change (particularly gentrification), and produce an exhibit. I don’t think it occurs to them until a few weeks into the semester that this work will force them to consider their own positionality, assumptions, and responsibilities. Whether it has any lasting impact on how they engage with their studies or with their neighbors is impossible to know. But I do believe it humbles them at least a little bit. And if I can teach humility to college students at a private university, I think I’m doing pretty well.

**DD:** I teach the course called Research in Art + Education, which is half of a two-part, required capstone experience for graduate students in the Art, Education, and Community Practice program. This program attracts students from various backgrounds, including artists, designers, performers, filmmakers, and activists interested in the arts. All the students have a strong foundation in the arts, and some have experience teaching elementary- or secondary-school-aged students. Still others might have a minor or major in the humanities. Their academic backgrounds are varied and they bring this range of experiences to the course, which is really exciting. Although interested in artistic activism most of my students have little experience designing and enacting tactical art interventions in partnership with community organizations or in the public sphere. This field-based course focuses on envisioning new ways of acting and thinking in our communities in order to create change. It deliberately challenges the notion that art practice, research, and social activism are discrete entities.

I have envisioned this class as a collaborative space where we first learn about different forms of artistic activist practices in a series of case studies—in order to analyze how artists and artist collectives
Student Diamond Naga Siu photographed the South Bronx resident and journalist Ed Garcia Conde holding his asthma inhaler. Up to 17 percent of South Bronx residents suffer from asthma, making it one of the worst neighborhoods in New York for respiratory health. Most people attribute the high rate to the car and truck traffic introduced to the area by the urban renewal era confluence of highways, including the Cross-Bronx, Major Deegan, and Bruckner. Photograph by Diamond Naga Siu, “Asthma Inhaler,” (Dis)Placed Urban Histories: Melrose, accessed January 3, 2019, http://displacedhistories.hosting.nyu.edu/spring2017/items/show/86.
engage with communities, social movements, neighborhoods, and cities. Some of the research-based approaches we focus on are oral history, ethnography, archival research, community-based participatory action research, exhibition-as-research, and mapping as an activist intervention. The questions we explore in the course are, What does fieldwork mean in artistic activist practices? How do we learn to really listen to people and their concerns and then work together to enact interventions? How do artists and artist collectives organize, listen, collect stories, design tactical interventions, and document their process for critical reflection? Further, the collaborative nature of artistic activism requires us to continuously reflect on power, voice, and representation. Who speaks for whom and how? What does true collaboration look like and feel like? This exploration generates lively discussions on how to envision tactical interventions using the arts, but it is still theoretical.

The moment we move from this exploration to their own projects, students become uncertain about implementing their interventions in collaboration with an organization. This anxiety is not surprising as most of the students come from a traditional art background where their practice is studio-based and they have not learned about grassroots organizing. A majority of the class time focuses on how to design and implement projects in collaboration with their chosen organizations. Learning to work in collaboration is new for many of them, as art practices are normally solitary practices. This collaborative practice forces them to think about how their position and location shapes their conversations. Their design of the intervention and the responsibility of working across differences is challenging yet ultimately rewarding when they see the effects of the art intervention on the people they work with. I think humility and patience are two of the main takeaways for students, which are important dispositions they need in order to work toward social change.

GBV: I teach in the urban studies department at the New School, and I primarily work with undergraduates. The Layered SPURA class, and most of my engaged partnership classes, are geared toward juniors and seniors, but I also get sophomores and the occasional first year. My students often come from Eugene Lang College, the
liberal arts undergraduate college of the New School, but I also always have design students from Parsons and nontraditional students from the bachelor’s program at the School of Public Engagement. All of these institutions are part of the university of the New School. Hence my students are a range of ages and bring with them some widely varying backgrounds, experiences, and understandings of the city.

Most often, I need to give students a very deep and very rapid dive into the relevant urban context. For the Layered SPURA project, the first half of the semester was a crash course on histories of housing in New York. This was something most students knew very little about beyond their own experience of overpriced apartments in gentrifying neighborhoods, an experience that made them keen to understand—and also wary of their own roles and positionality in the neighborhoods where we were working.

Because the way I teach is always a hybrid of seminar and studio, and my classes demand rigor in critical writing and thinking as well as in creative practice, it is rare that any student will consistently operate within their comfort zone. Some students are very skilled with their visual work and exploration, but in-depth writing and research is new to them. Other students can research and write skillfully, but creating something in any other medium is a challenge for them. As a result, I often have students work together in teams—not so that one is designated the “designer” and then given all the visual work to do, but so that they each bring their individual strengths to the team and they can teach one another and learn how to create something together.

One perception that students typically brought with them to my SPURA City Studio classes was that the Lower East Side was a place for bars and nightlife or overpriced studio apartments, but not necessarily a coherent neighborhood. They might have a sense of its history as a center for immigration in the early twentieth century, but frequently their knowledge of the place did not extend beyond that. The majority of my students also brought a political orientation with them. One that was often, though not always, strongly in support of community members and against displacement. They were primed to hear the story I had to tell them, even if they didn’t always have the context for it. They were also extremely sensitive to their own roles within the neighborhood and their crises over positionality, and the
possibility that they might be part of the problem, raised important questions in our dialogues through the class. They were active parts of the conversation of “Why should people trust us as allies?” and asking that question was a crucial learning opportunity of the course.

Sustainability

DM: Here’s a radical idea: depending on how you understand sustainability, I’m not sure it is really a valuable goal.

Very often, the more deeply institutionalized projects and courses become, the more “sustainable” we believe they are. Sustainable courses attract departmental funds. They get tied to programs of study. They may even achieve media attention. But these forms of support can also disconnect projects and courses from the communities
they intend to serve. They become sites for the reproduction of expertise and the assertion of authority rather than spaces for dialogue, debate, and social justice action.

I have come to think that for projects and courses to actually function in the realm of advocacy and serve social justice, they should be conceived of as temporary and they should resist the kind of sustainability that comes from institutional acceptance.

**Instead, we might begin to think of sustainability as something achieved through capacity building.** If the goal of our projects and courses is to address immediate needs and advocate around pressing social and political issues, and if our premise is that public history methods can be understood as a set of tools we use to meet these goals, then our political aims are better served by working to build community-based capabilities to deploy these methods without us. Our work may be most successful when we become obsolete.

**MR:** What do we mean by sustainability? It is most important to nurture and sustain the relationships our work builds—between me and community leaders, between my program and external organizations, and between my students and their project partners inside and outside the university. While a specific project may end, I want the connections to continue. **I want those relationships to be sustainable; I don’t want to “use them up” in a slash-and-burn way.** I’ve seen examples where public historians “burn out” their community partners because of mismatched goals, unreasonable demands for time or resources, or simply a lack of shared authority and expertise. Sometimes, public historians can run roughshod over the community. This is where a discussion of ethics is critical. How do we ethically work with communities? How do we ethically work with students on public history projects (which are still so outside the mainstream of undergraduate and graduate education)? Over the three years I’ve been teaching at Rutgers–Newark and leading classroom-based projects, I’ve ramped up my expectations from the students. At what point is it too much? How do we make sure that these ambitious classes are accessible to students who may be going to school part time while working?

I hope that I’m building and nurturing relationships with communities over time. My central relationship, however, has been with the
Newark Public Library, which is a great partnership, since we both are in the business of public engagement and share a language. Specific community partnerships grow out of this hub.

**DD:** My desire to develop long-term relationships with a few organizations in the Lower East Side for our program in Art, Education and Community Practice was based on my understanding that only **through consistent work within an organization rooted in a community will we be able to create real social change.** Otherwise, our tactical art interventions, whether in the public sphere or within a community organization may have a limited effectiveness in raising awareness about an issue, but fail to move people to take social action to create change. Even though my students were contingent labor that would move in and out of projects, I sought to maintain long-term relationships, becoming the glue that kept the partnership alive and healthy. A critical question that emerged from the Community Book of Wellbeing is, Who is being sustained, by whom, and for what purposes? And what are the power dynamics that come into play in relation to sustainability? These questions on sustainability lead me to think through how social change is understood in relation to art.

Social change in relation to socially engaged art moves across a spectrum from raising political awareness about a social issue to activating art as a political project to create social action. In this latter understanding, art is about organizing, which may be temporary and not necessarily about movement building. Art as organizing suggests that the goal is not necessarily to create a discrete art object that raises awareness about an issue. Rather, the art process involves understanding how and why we choose to work with people in the community and what kinds of networks of solidarity among people and organizations we can build, as well as asking at each stage of planning and implementation who the process serves, for what purpose, and how power dynamics play a role. It is through developing social relationships, alliances, and networks that we can create a cultural shift that precipitates change.

Although the Community Book of Wellbeing project did not lead to changing public health policy in NYC, it enabled privileged and sheltered students to build unexpected and mutually beneficial relationships with elderly, low-income, Dominican and Puerto Rican women
in the Lower East Side community. This experience initiated a culture shift for my students that has the potential to mobilize change. These students have gone back to the University Settlement and visited the women a few times after the semester course was over and gave each of the women the book that they created together about what well-being means to them. **Sustainability in this context is both a process and a disposition that is cultivated rather than a goal to be achieved.**

**RA:** From my perspective, the sustainability of a community partnership, a project, or a campaign is almost always something that needs to be driven by my community partner. If an organization is fatigued or burnt out by working with my students and me—for any reason, whether it be lack of capacity or mismatched goals—I think the solution is an open-ended pause. Community partnerships have to be relationships built on integrity and mutuality. With my community partners in this and other projects, it has been essential that we communicate about changing goals and projects, and it is equally essential that we don’t abandon one another *in medias res* when changes do occur. Like any potentially long-term relationship, there are moments of exciting activity, and there are lulls, and we have to be open to all of it or risk doing more harm than good.

But I do approach these partnerships as potentially long-term, which means I see them as an opportunity for coproducing meaningful social change, not as a precursor to institutionalization. My course is iterative, so each year we are building on work done in previous years. Ultimately, the historical research we’ve conducted will go public in ways that transcend the course I teach. That’s the kind of sustainability I’m seeking beyond the community relationships I’ve built: public history that is usable, recyclable, and generative whether or not it is tied to my course, my students, or me. So the course itself is simply a vehicle for producing the research and, if I’m lucky, seeding a social justice orientation in my students. If it no longer serves those purposes, it is expendable.

**GBV:** I have some conflicting thoughts about sustainability. Having worked on a project for five years, with one main partner, I’m committed
to the long-term trust that’s built up through a long-sustained partnership. Yet I’ve also experienced the immense shift and change that every organization goes through over the years, and the need to shift and change that this engenders. People change jobs. An organization’s priorities can pivot to new and pressing campaigns. What challenges does this pose for sustainability? This is also the case with politically shifting situations, in which we also often work. These changes mean that the project often needs to shift—and that is both important and very difficult, especially when bringing on fifteen to twenty new students each year. So what does flexibility look like within sustainability?

I am deeply committed to long-term partnerships, both because I think it’s important for establishing and maintaining trust to keep showing up but also because I’ve seen so many times how partnerships can change and become something you never thought possible. Time allows for new possibilities to emerge—something that might surprise everyone—and that usually just is not evident in year one.

Sustainability to me also means recognizing that things end. No project needs to go on forever—nor should it, usually. But being thoughtful about “exiting” community (as the Urban Bush Women so helpfully put it) is not something we discuss a great deal. There are many reasons projects need to end—sometimes a new project becomes more pressing or even more useful for the neighborhood or community, sometimes funding ends, sometimes collaborators leave a job and no one is left to continue the partnership, sometimes faculty time becomes more limited than it was before. These are all normal things, not failures. Without planning for these possibilities and then dealing with them, we risk the good that is done in projects by their precipitous end.

Time is such an important aspect of this conversation. So is compensation, financial or otherwise. The sustainability of a project often depends on the project not, as Mary Rizzo says, “using up” anyone. It’s important that partners’ time is not monopolized for more than they can give and also that faculty, especially part-time faculty who often teach these classes, are not spending (inordinate) amounts of unpaid time on a project beyond “contact hours.” It’s just as important that students feel like the project works with the time that they have
to give, as we increasingly work with students who have jobs, lives, families—other demands on their time beyond schoolwork.

**Building Trust**

**MR:** The biggest challenge to community partners trusting us is what our universities did to those communities! Rutgers–Newark, like many urban universities, displaced communities through eminent domain as it was expanding its campus in the 1960s. Now regularly regarded as having the most diverse undergraduate population in the country, there were few Black or Latinx students at the university before 1968. They fought to be admitted. The Black Organization of Students’ takeover of Conklin Hall was the turning point for Rutgers–Newark development as a diverse and inclusive place. In the twenty-first century, the living memory of people who went through those experiences is merging with current concerns about the gentrification of downtown Newark, a process in which Rutgers is again implicated.

So with that backdrop, why does anybody in the community trust us? **Not to be flippant, but the simple answer is that they get some kind of material benefit out of working with us.** As public historians in the academy, we see very clearly what we get from working with communities (projects for our students, internships, publications based on this work, tenure and promotion, etc.), but we’re less able to see the immediate value of this work from the point of view of our partners.

Members of the LGBTQ community working with Mayor Cory Booker and the Newark LGBTQ Community Center connected with Rutgers–Newark historians to create the Queer Newark Oral History Project because they recognized the importance of gathering and preserving the history of the community. They were especially concerned for LGBTQ youth: “This absence of a grounding history, and this sense that they are nowhere reflected in the history they learn in school, can add to the alienation that gay youth experience simply by virtue of growing up in heteronormative families, communities, and religious traditions.” The founders of Queer Newark were able to get funding from Rutgers for events, speakers, graduate students to conduct oral histories, community oral history training, and a multimedia exhibit about queer life in Newark. In this case, we have been leveraging Rutgers resources in support of the community.
Money isn’t everything though. We need to treat our community partners as true partners, respecting their ideas and perspectives and also understanding that their involvement in these projects may wax and wane, while ours must remain consistent. One thing that does worry me, however, is that the qualities and skills that build trust—empathy, listening, compromise, and collaboration—are highly feminized. We know that the majority of public historians are women but that many public history institutions are run by men. Institutions may rely on community partners, but they may not appropriately value the labor that goes into maintaining these relationships. If women are being tasked with building community (because they’re naturally “better” at it), does this mean we are not teaching all public historians the appropriate skills? Have we failed to recognize and teach our students—especially our female students—additional skills that might better position them to become cultural institutions’ leaders in the future?

RA: It is certainly true that my university has made a deep emotional and physical impression on its surrounding neighborhood such that negotiating my own positionality as separate from that of the institution that employs me has been a big challenge. NYU’s neighbors tend not only to have great antagonism toward the university—for many good reasons—but also toward its students and faculty, who are seen as individual agents of gentrification. In another research project I have been conducting on the nearby Lower East Side, some of our local participants refuse to set foot in an NYU building.

As my course has engaged with communities that are a little further afield from NYU, though, different issues arise. The organizations with whom we work and the neighborhoods where they are situated have predominantly Black and Brown populations with many residents who are more comfortable speaking in Spanish than English. My students, on the other hand, are typically (though not always) White and lacking Spanish-language skills. I, too, am White and speak only English. And while class status is often indeterminate for all of us, privilege is legible if only because we are affiliated with an expensive private university. Because of the ways in which gentrification is often visually codified by how people look, my students and I often present as “gentrifiers” and the subject of our study—neighborhood change—further emphasizes this. So I often wonder, why do our community partners trust us?
My answer, however incomplete or unscholarly, is that we claim no authority—or, put differently, we approach the partnership with humility. Different from a “shared authority” perspective, ours is that the community itself has the authority and experience to tell its own story. We are not amplifying so much as actually listening. And our job is to use the tools of history to labor on behalf of and use our resources toward the shared, mutually determined, social justice objective that animates the partnership in the first place. For the course, this objective has been to document the stories of long-time residents of changing neighborhoods and produce an archive of historical research that is available to our community partners. The social justice objective is for this research to make its way into community advocacy materials and to help with community building around self-advocacy in a neighborhood encountering increased displacement. That we are willing to and enthusiastic about doing this work as defined by our partner and without special gain for our own institutions has been, I think, central to building trust. I also think just being reliable, openhearted, and kind friends to our partners has been of incredible benefit—and it’s genuine!

DD: The communities in the Lower East Side do not trust NYU given the ways it has treated its surrounding neighborhoods—contribute to gentrification and failing to promote goodwill with local residents. So it was initially difficult for me to enter these communities and indicate that we would like to work with them over a long period of time. I have been successful when I was able to begin with personal contacts that I had in the Lower East Side or an introduction from a colleague who knew a community member. Developing personal relationships was critical to build community trust and establish their willingness to work with us. When the director of the Commission for Public Health approached me to work with his staff to collect stories about well-being, he was very clear that it was not NYU that he was working with but rather our program, which he felt was different from NYU as an institution. He was very clear that he did not want NYU’s medical school or its Global Public Health Initiative to know about this project or be involved in any way.

Humility is a key aspect of community-based pedagogy: we do not speak for the community; rather, they speak for themselves.
In our case we used art as the conduit to encourage people to talk about their experiences of well-being. The community trusted that we knew something about art and how to use it to facilitate dialogue. We have to build trust with people. It is always tenuous, and it takes constant attention and effort. It is by building long-term relationships and not through a single encounter that trust can slowly emerge.

**DM:** I tend to engage in projects that are not of my own design. I don’t typically approach a community partner with research I’d like to conduct or a project I’d like to implement. Rather, I talk to potential community partners for a while before asking if there is anything my students and I might help with. In this scenario, I build a relationship with individuals and organizations first, then we develop a plan together.

That was not really the case with my current project, Preserve the Baltimore Uprising. Because I developed the digital, crowdsourced collection in response to a sense of urgency, I had to find partners and build connections retrospectively. Nonetheless, underneath the project are several key values that have helped me make connections and build relationships. **First, this is not my research. I am not seeking out partners to build the collection; I am asking potential partners if the collection might be useful for meeting their own goals. Second, this is not my project. I have created a framework for expanding the reach and use of the collection, but within that framework, there is significant flexibility.** I am grateful to have won a Public Engagement Fellowship from the Whiting Foundation to help build relationships and transform the collection into a truly collaborative space. With this support, during 2018–19, I worked with three Baltimore City high schools and several community-based partners—including a local culture organizer and a historically African American social club—to activate the collection. I provided training in collections development and oral history; what my partners actually did with that training was entirely up to them. The project looked quite different at each school and for each partner. Third, I work hard to remain aware of how, when, and with whom I deploy my authority. There are moments when asserting myself as Dr. or Professor Meringolo makes sense because it assists my partner in achieving a goal or gaining access to resources. There are moments when it can be a barrier to building trust. Learning to identify those moments is a lifelong process. Finally, while this
is improving, most universities do not have a structure for bringing together faculty who are engaged in community-based work. Yet these structures provide a crucial support system. Working in isolation tends to magnify the challenges of building trust. Entering into dialogue with other public humanists and public historians helps illuminate our common experiences and identify best practices.

Candidly, the most difficult part of managing community relationships and building trust for me is that I can be sensitive and very hard on myself. In any working partnership, there will be moments when trust is temporarily lost, when a partner feels slighted, when there has been a misunderstanding, big or small. When that happens, my first reaction is to believe that I have failed. I have learned to acknowledge that feeling in myself but also to keep it to myself. Humility and honesty are key, but self-deprecation is not helpful. I personally find this difficult, but I am working on it—all the time!

GBV: Building trust often starts with overcoming our institutions’ prior relationships with our partners or in the neighborhoods where we are working. While the New School doesn’t have quite the real estate empire of other New York universities, it is growing, and it is certainly perceived as similar. In my experience working on the Lower East Side, people are both drawn to the possibilities, resources, or exposure that institutions can give them and are skeptical of being taken advantage of by those same institutions. Sometimes this skepticism originates from a general recognition of universities as agents of gentrification or displacement, but it also comes from much smaller, more personal experiences.

Too many times, I’ve found that in partnering with community organizations, which are almost always small and stretched, I’m navigating the fallout and bad feelings engendered by some other class’s or university’s community-based project, in which community members felt taken advantage of, or where they felt their time was not compensated, or where they felt that students simply wanted them to do their schoolwork for them rather than treating them as experts or teachers. In this context, I’m navigating my own relationships, histories, positionality, and institutional privilege, as well as issues of the larger field of community-engaged teaching, in which
For each year's Layered SPURA exhibition, they created a “newspaper” publication that exhibitiongoers could take. The first three are shown here. They included exhibition information as well as student-written guides demystifying the planning processes for city-owned sites like SPURA and mapping the considerable community assets of the Lower East Side. Photograph by Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani.
there are few agreed-upon norms about the ways that universities and classes engage with community partners. While there is a great deal of excellent discussion about community partners as coteachers, and those teachers and practitioners are the ones I like to engage, there are also classes in which the framework still hews too closely to a model of expertise held within the university and brought to the community, a model of “helping” rather than collaborating or learning together, and never enough recognition of the deep expertise held within communities, community organizations, and individuals.

In terms of overcoming some of this, I think time is crucial, both in the regularity of showing up and in allowing time for collaborations and projects to change and grow. This kind of time is challenged by the semester model in many ways—in particular by classes in which the idea that a “finished product” has to be created by the end of the semester. This can sometimes work, especially in multiyear projects, wherein a given “product” is building on past work, but it is often difficult, because the focus on the product too often leads people to forget that the process—in a class and in a collaboration—is primarily one of learning, not production.

In terms of what’s worked for me, I’d echo one of Denise’s points: I very frequently collaborate with organizations and communities that are already working on an issue or project, and then we think collaboratively about what an art or public history component could add. This is often a process of learning from both sides—not everyone is sure of what art or public history in the context of community activism can do, and I always need to listen deeply to understand what is at the core of the work we are embarking upon. The beginning of these collaborations requires that everyone comes to the table with some ideas to share as well as the willingness to change plans entirely, to make something new together. In the five years I worked on SPURA, primarily with GOLES, each year we made a community-based exhibition but the process was one of negotiating, reimagining, and experimenting about what an “exhibition” could do, what questions it could pose, who its audience might be, and what role it could play in the larger campaigns around affordable housing development at this site of inequity, displacement, and insufficient housing.
Radical Potential

**DM:** For Preserve the Baltimore Uprising, the radical potential resides, at least in part, in its potential to challenge systemic racism in the cultural sector.

Shortly after I built the project’s Omeka site, the digital projects coordinator for the Maryland Historical Society approached me and proposed we work in partnership, and I agreed. By **locating the collection there, we are posing a direct challenge to the institutional structures that have led to the absence of urban history, African American history, and histories of unrest in the society’s collections.** Materials uploaded to the site are not subject to the same collections committee review as three-dimensional or traditional archival materials, and contributors do not give up their ownership rights. This allows contributors to exert significant control over the way the collection represents the city, Freddie Gray’s neighborhood, the African American experience, the parameters of community, and urban protest.

The radical potential of the project also resides, at least in part, in our efforts to ensure that more local people recognize and activate their ownership of the project. By facilitating the use of the collection by students, teachers, and others, with support from the Whiting Foundation Public Engagement Fellowship program, we sought to decentralize the project more fully.

**DD:** Using the arts to facilitate discussion as we did with the Community Book of Wellbeing is not new. What makes it radical is that, as a form of research, it is undertaken in a university by graduate students in collaboration with a community organization, the Commission for Public Health, and senior women with the goal of transforming public health policy. This visual research is meant to be useful to the community and social struggle—a critical aspect of what has come to be called “militant research.” The **radical aspect of militant research is that through new ways of acting or embodied practice we learn to think in new ways or shape new knowledge.** According to the activist academic Andrea Smith, quoting her mentor Judy Vaughn, “You don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking.” Working across different forms (visual,
writing, talking) and methods, then, is part of this process of using art to create social change—a form of militant research.

**RA:** Arguably, projects and courses like *(Dis)Placed Urban Histories* are not radical. *If they are, it is only because universities are reluctant to provide the support and flexibility necessary for instructors to develop courses that are driven as much by community needs as by academic objectives.* This is tied to questions of tenure, faculty course load, pay, accreditation, and sometimes even politics. (Many universities are reluctant to finance critiques of their own role in a neighborhood, for example.) At the same time, collaborations between historians and organizations that provide direct services to underserved communities are also disappointingly rare, and therefore their very existence is radical. As historians, we can and should be working with advocacy organizations that do the justice work we believe in. Organizations should know their own histories and the historical contexts that have shaped them. But perhaps more importantly, people who are served by these organizations, particularly when they are bound to a particular place, benefit from telling, hearing, and discussing one another’s histories. **Community does not exist because people live near one another or have precisely the same experiences; it exists because people know and really listen to one another.** “Doing” history is a powerful way of building common cause. For organizations, like WHEDco, that aim to represent communities that have long been misunderstood and often neglected by government, a sense of common cause is crucial.

**MR:** For many people working in universities or public history organizations, just addressing the topics of police accountability and police brutality explored in *From Rebellion to Review Board: Newark Fights for Police Accountability* would have been radical. **But the meaning of radical is always “local.”** Newark is a city with a long tradition of Black power and Black cultural nationalism, most famously through the work of poet and activist Amiri Baraka, whose son, Ras, is now our mayor. The only complaint I heard from a community member about the exhibit was that it was not radical enough.

I’ve thought a lot about what made this project radical. What I think is that we did something quite unique by weaving all of these
stories together into one narrative. The accepted narrative, the one that is repeated in academic and popular histories and in our local monuments and commemorations, positions the 1967 rebellion as the event of modern Newark history. In its shadow everything else lies. **By putting police overreach at the center of our exhibit, we connected together topics that had never been aligned in precisely the same way before.** This was particularly true in the inclusion of Defarra Gaymon’s murder. Gaymon was shot by a police officer who was patrolling a county park where gay men cruised for sex. Was Gaymon cruising? It’s unclear, but even if he was, his actions should not have warranted a death sentence. His murder started a public conversation about police relations with the LGBTQ community. Like many cities, Newark struggles with providing safe spaces for LGBTQ people. To position Gaymon’s murder in the same story as the beating of John Smith by police (the event that started the 1967 rebellion) powerfully claimed space for gay men and lesbians in the history of Newark. Similarly, by discussing the successes and the challenges that came from the Black and Puerto Rican coalition, we helped bring the Puerto Rican community’s story more fully into the narrative of Newark, known almost paradigmatically as a Black city. Did viewers recognize this renarrativization? I’m not sure. We certainly didn’t proceed with that in mind so it’s not made as an explicit point in the exhibit. But as someone who is training people to be scholars and public historians, I see this kind of broad perspective that allows stories from different communities and times to be brought together as our superpower.

**GBV:** One thing that made our approach in Layered SPURA radical was the extended time frame, which allowed the project to change over time in response to a volatile and very changeable political environment. As we were working on the project, the planning process for SPURA changed drastically, meaning that each semester’s class was extremely different. Each class created their own exhibitions, but they also all built on the work that had come before. The other radical idea was not one that we identified from the outset—it was that one of the greatest contributions of this project would be in the creation of a new kind of space in the neighborhood, outside of the battlegrounds of the community board meetings. We found that what
exhibitions or creative practice can do is to bring multiple sides of an issue together in one space. Of course, it mattered what was on the walls, or in people’s hands, as they engaged with the projects, but what mattered even more was the creation of a space—even a temporary one—that people could share. The possibilities for this work, and the challenging relationships they tackle, crystalized for me when, at the opening of our second exhibition, one of my partners, GOLES executive director Damaris Reyes, leaned over to whisper in surprise that she’d never before seen this group of people in the same room without screaming.

Notes
