Curating the Civil Rights in Brooklyn Oral History Collection

The Brooklyn CORE Oral History Collection illustrates a critical history of the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality, a pivotal civil rights organization that played a central role in the American Civil Rights movement. The chapter drew attention to patterns of racial discrimination in Brooklyn's housing, employment, municipal services, and public schools. Their dynamic direct actions forced city government and the media to recognize daily forms of racism that shaped the lives of black communities in Brooklyn.

As the curatorial team for this project, we had four primary goals: to curate the collection in a way that makes it meaningful to end-users; to create research materials around the collection; to make those materials available to end-users online; to find additional materials to augment the collection. We approached our work with a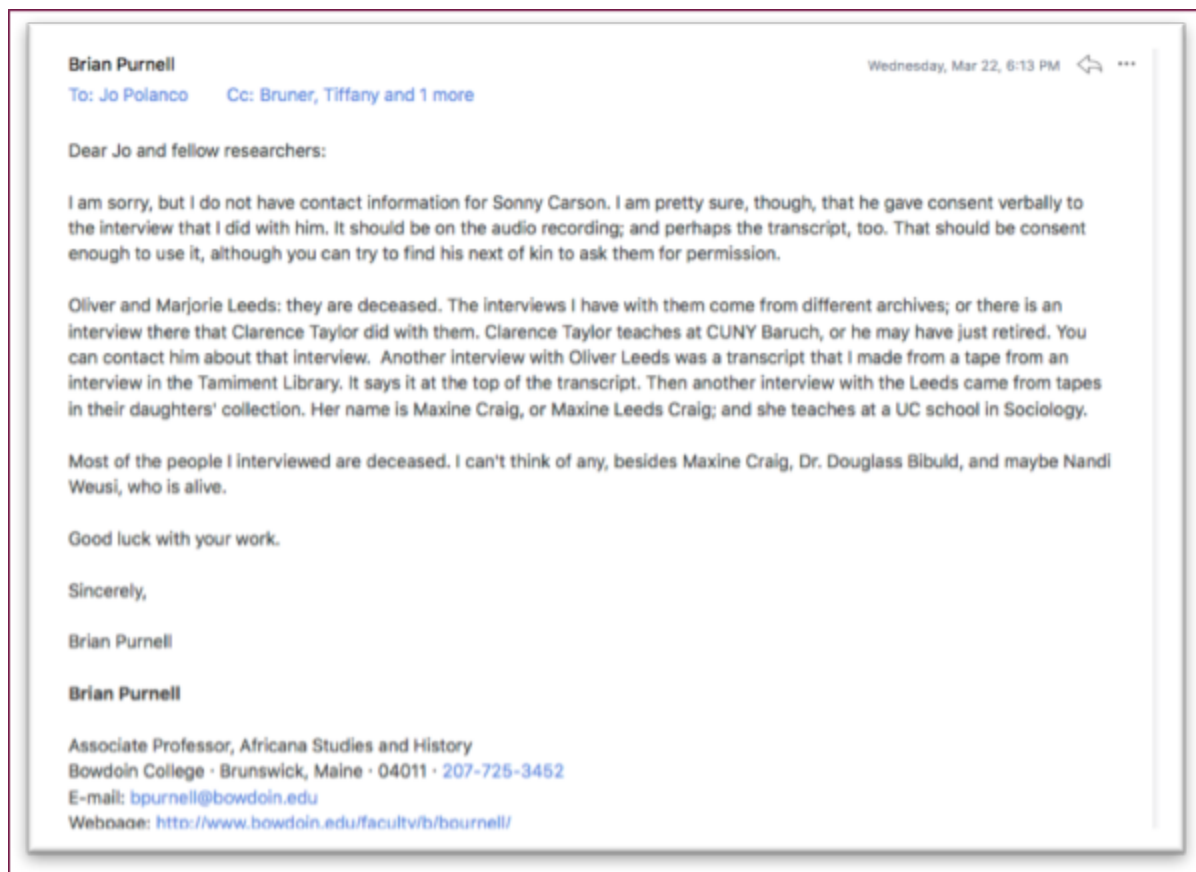n awareness that these critical histories of activism and oppression in Brooklyn are not often publically available online. This motivated us to provide various entry points from which users could engage these stories and build an understanding of the dynamic work of Brooklyn CORE.

Accomplishments

We met our goal of creating accessible research materials by conducting historical research, developing web content, and coordinating with the other teams. Our process began with becoming familiar with Dr. Purnell's dissertation, listening to the tapes, and identifying digital repositories holding related materials on Brooklyn CORE. Through this

work we were able to identify key narratives in the collection and began to brainstorm ways to make them accessible to end users.

Our role in meeting this goal was identifying which tapes could be digitally published and securing rights to do so. We achieved this through conversations with staff at Brooklyn Public Library (2017) and Dr.Purnell. In this way, our team was able to determine which tapes we could include in our exhibit. We then focused on writing descriptions of the tapes and their connection to Brooklyn CORE's overall work for our website.

Brian Purnell   Wednesday, Mar 22, 6:13 PM

To: Jo Polanco   Cc: Bruner, Tiffany and 1 more

Dear Jo and fellow researchers:

I am sorry, but I do not have contact information for Sonny Carson. I am pretty sure, though, that he gave consent verbally to the interview that I did with him. It should be on the audio recording; and perhaps the transcript, too. That should be consent enough to use it, although you can try to find his next of kin to ask them for permission.

Oliver and Marjorie Leeds: they are deceased. The interviews I have with them come from different archives; or there is an interview there that Clarence Taylor did with them. Clarence Taylor teaches at CUNY Baruch, or he may have just retired. You can contact him about that interview. Another interview with Oliver Leeds was a transcript that I made from a tape from an interview in the Tamiment Library. It says it at the top of the transcript. Then another interview with the Leeds came from tapes in their daughters' collection. Her name is Maxine Craig, or Maxine Leeds Craig; and she teaches at a UC school in Sociology.

Most of the people I interviewed are deceased. I can't think of any, besides Maxine Craig, Dr. Douglass Bibuld, and maybe Nandi Weusi, who is alive.

Good luck with your work.

Sincerely,

Brian Purnell

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Above: Email response from Dr. Brian Purnell regarding rights releases to interviews.

Early in the semester, we decided to build an interactive map as a research tool and entry point to the Brooklyn CORE Oral History Collection. Gentrification erases history by pushing communities out of a neighborhood and altering public space so its history and identity is no longer visible. A map therefore allowed us to preserve these stories and

make them accessible; to ensure they are always told with an awareness of where they happened. We identified over 50 potential map points discussed in the tapes but narrowed this down to ten. We linked these sites to items in the collection and used Knight Lab's storymap.js to actualize an interactive map of CORE's work in Brooklyn.
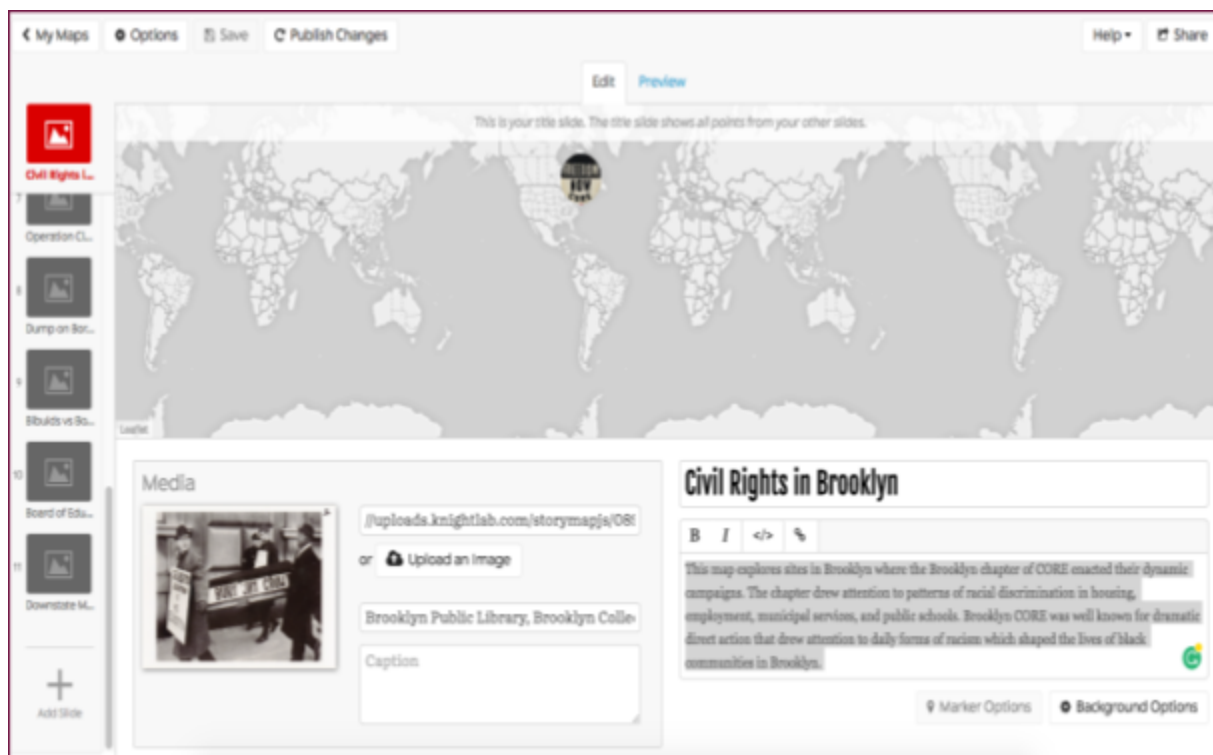
Above: Editing the interactive Civil Rights in Brooklyn map

Finally, to meet our goal of finding additional materials to augment the collection, we visited Brooklyn Public Library's Brooklyn Collection and selected collection of images to use in the map and accompany the recordings. There we found images of flyers used by Brooklyn CORE, photographs of their campaigns, and articles which illuminated how they were discussed in the media. These added rich visuals to the website and acted as a second entry
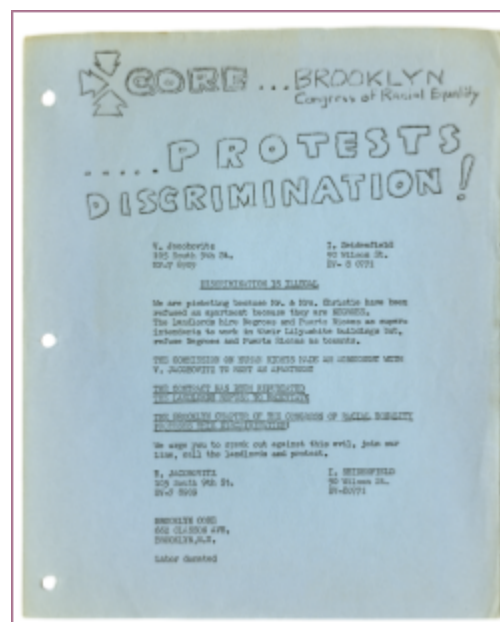

Brooklyn CORE flyer referencing housing discrimination protests.

point from which end users could engage and digest the histories represented in our project.

Curatorial Challenges

COMMAND OF MATERIAL

The Brooklyn CORE Oral History collection, part of BPL's Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection, was new to the curatorial team. Despite knowledge of the overall civil rights
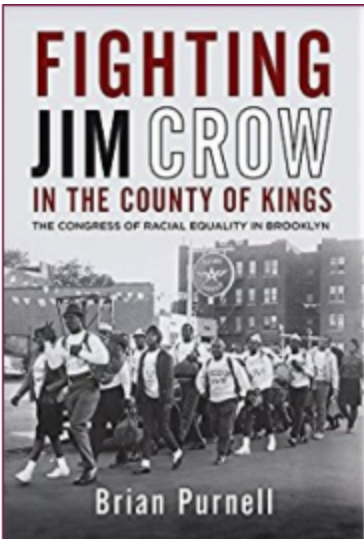
Dr. Purnell's 2013 book.

movement occurring in the 1960s, we knew little the of related activities in New York City and specifically, Brooklyn. Dr. Purnell's dissertation and subsequent book, "Fighting Jim Crow in the County of Kings" (2013), focused on introducing CORE's civil rights activision in the northern United States. Our initial challenge was to gain sufficient command of the historical material, contexts and perspectives that would give us an authoritative voice, enabling us to select and organize the information. To address this challenge we considered how best to quickly absorb the stories documented in Purnell's 467-page dissertation, 368-page book and 42 hours of oral history recordings. Our approach was to divide the campaigns presented in seven book chapters among the four team members allowing each to be immersed in the events, stories and participants. With each team member well-versed in the stories and principals, together we able to identify and highlight the significant elements required to confidently present the material.

RELEASES

Our research helped us identify the most engaging storytellers and their recordings. The ideal content for the online archive would be entertaining as well as be of good technical quality (clear audio). Our next challenge was to

Portrait of Oliver Leeds. A charismatic early leader of CORE, whose full oral history was not released for online use.

ensure that we had the proper releases to make the selected digitized recordings available online.   We needed to learn what material was in copyright, who owns it and how copyright law would dictate the manner in which we could reproduce and make the archive available (Briston, 2015). The recorded oral histories covered two periods.   Dr. Purnell's research includes interviews he conducted 2000-2005. He also included oral history recordings from Clarence Taylor's research conducted in the late 1990's. Some of the most engaging recordings come from this earlier period. Upon reviewing the language of the available releases we, together with BPL and Professor Cocciolo, determined that the language allowed for including post-2000 recordings online. Obtaining the appropriate rights for the earlier recordings involved contacting extended family members of deceased

> Transcriptions, tapes, and correspondences will be stored in a file cabinet in the researcher's home for his exclusive use. The tapes and transcription or copies of the correspondences, however, may be deposited by the researcher in an archive for the public's use three years after the completion of my dissertation.

Excerpt from release signed by the oral history interviewees.

interviewees. As this was out of the scope of this project we were able to include some of the earlier recordings by using short audio clips under fair use rules for educational purposes. Under copyright law, fair use limits the absolute rights of the copyright holder allowing for purposes of news reporting, scholarship, or research.

COPYRIGHTED IMAGES

Another curatorial challenge was presented by the use of photographic images and

ephemera. We knew period imagery would be the most effective way to create an engaging structure to support the audio portion of the site. The 1960s civil rights era offered many striking images and CORE's activities were well documented

Above: Members of CORE marching on The Brooklyn Bridge. This is an example of a copyrighted image that we did not have permissions to include on the website.

through news coverage. Through online research we discovered images related to our topic in several repositories with copyright. Fortunately for this archive project, some the images owned by BPL were available to us. Other powerful images depicting protests and capturing the mood of the period are copyrighted (Bob Adelman, Getty, AP and other news organizations). As our online archive is a school project for educational, non-commercial purposes we decided there was a basis for fair use of certain images.

Decisions

Curatorial is tasked with taking an idea or collection and creating an enticing narrative. The curation of an exhibition whether a website or a physical spaces requires individuals to make many decisions pertaining to the desired narrative. In order to create a successful narrative, the team knew it was important to layout the steps from start to finish. This included conducting background research, listening to the oral history recordings, reading the material within the collection, and deciding what aspects would be included in the archive website. One of the first decisions made was setting up an effective way to communicate. We chose Slack as it offers features which support group work such as instant messaging and the ability to share documents and other material. We also created a Google Drive folder to upload all shared material.

Once our communication channels were set up, we began conducting background research on the Civil Rights movement in Brooklyn. This meant dedicating time to read as much of Dr. Purnell's dissertation and/or book as possible and reviewing the campaigns to pull out common threads. During our initial research we discovered a map in Dr. Purnell's book noting important locations. Using his map as a guide, we decided to create our own interactive map with the material available in the oral history collection. As previously state, the choice of an interactive map recognized the significance of "place" in the oral histories which would be archived.

With the exhibition narrative established, our next step was to create a project workflow plan. Our project workflow contained the tasks and associated deadlines that would result in a thoughtful and appealing narrative.

	DA BPL Project Plan/Workflow ☆ ⬢						
	File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Add-ons Help Last edit was 14 minutes ago						
fx	Person Assigned						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Person Assigned	Task				Due Date	Status
2	Mia	Read dissertation				03-01	
3	All	Email template to reach out to interview ppl and Brian Purnell				03-08	Sent to Anthony 3-22
4	All	Touch base with digitization team in class on 3/8 about plans				03-08	Done 3-22
5	All	Touch base with metadata team in class 3/8 about plans				03-08	Done 3-22
6	All	Touch base with design about 3/8 about when they need materials by				03-08	Completed
7	All	Identifying Stories from materials that we have - Master List of materia				03-15	Completed
8	Jo	Email BPL in advance of visit				03-20	Completed
9	All	Going to BPL and identifying relevant materials				3-27	Completed
10	Jo	Email template for Diana at BPL about permissions				3-23	Completed
11	All	Give design team majority of content for the map w/placeholders				04-05	Completed
12							
13		Wireframe for website/sketch?					
14	Mia	Look up GIS tools/design team					
15							

Above: View of DA/BPL Project Plan & Workflow Spreadsheet, created using Google Sheets.

Our decision to create an interactive map necessitated evaluating what to include. Dr. Purnell's map contains various points in Brooklyn detailed in the chapters. For our interactive map we decided to focus on key locations related to Housing Discrimination, Downstate Medical Center, Woolworth's Sympathy Strikes, Operation Clean Sweep, Ebinger's Bakery, and Bibuld vs. the Board of Education. We divided the campaigns among us, allowing each to fully immerse in the content. Key audio, map locations, photographs, and individual profiles were identified by listening to the oral histories and skimming through transcripts and book chapters. All content and descriptions were placed on our Google Drive Excel sheet, allowing members to make edits as needed as well as offering access to the design, digitization, and metadata teams. The sheet was divided into categorized tabs providing the content for the brklyncore.prattsi.org website and interactive map.
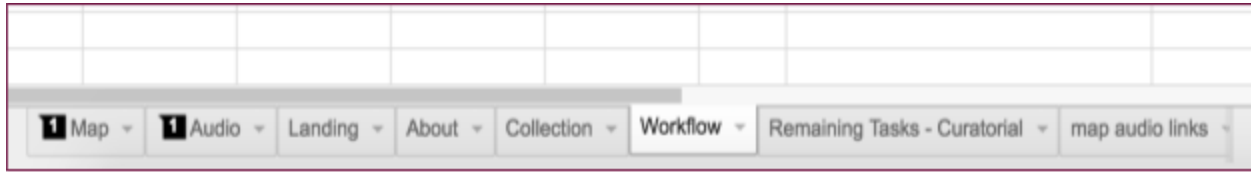
Above: View of tabs within the DA/BPL Project Plan & Workflow Spreadsheet.

Other important decisions made by the curatorial group included emailing Dr. Purnell for advice on obtaining additional releases and visiting Brooklyn Public Library to secure images and ephemera relating to Brooklyn CORE. Though Dr. Purnell kindly responded to our email, he had no advice to give on the subject. At this point we determined "fair use" rules could apply to our website's content. From our visit to BPL we were able to obtain compelling photographs and ephemera to include on the website and interactive map. Effective time management with the use of a project workflow plan impacted completion of the decisions and tasks.

Further Development

Oral histories offer a unique lens into the stories of people and their communities. Digitization projects, such as the one initiated by our class, strive to document, preserve, and share first-person stories from individuals who often get overlooked – voices absent from our community's history. During this project, we created an online exhibition about the oral history collection entitled "Civil Rights in Brooklyn Oral History Collection," in collaboration with the Brooklyn Public Library Special Collections. Future students of Projects in Digital Archives have numerous opportunities to expand upon our online exhibition of this collection. Potential projects will further contribute to the mission of generating interest in the Brooklyn Collection, increasing accessibility of these materials, and telling the story of Brooklyn CORE.

One continuing work on this project might be able to pursue securing necessary rights to release full interviews that are digitized but currently not published on the website. Acquiring rights would generate opportunities to create additional biographies

about CORE members. In combination, the interactive map (Storymap.js) may be expanded to include added locations, photographs, and links to supplemental audio clips.

A future class project could involve scanning Dr. Purnell's interview transcripts at high-res with OCR for inclusion on the website. Particular researchers may find value in perusing the transcripts and using the word-search function. Creating an aesthetically pleasing interface would allow the user to page through the transcripts while simultaneously listening to the digitized recordings. It would be ideal if, in addition to word-search capability, the plug-in would allow for highlighting of portions of the transcript to indicate critical sections of the interview. Additionally, course participants may compile a LibGuide of books, periodicals, and other materials related to Brooklyn CORE for the exhibition website. A LibGuide would offer a list of "suggested reading" for those interested in further exploring topics related to the Civil Rights movement in Brooklyn.

The curatorial group met with Brooklyn Public Library staff to select a group of photographs for digitization and inclusion in the exhibition website, however, due to design standards we did not utilize all of the images collected. This assortment of images could be incorporated into a photo-gallery for inclusion to the "Brooklyn Core Oral History" website. Alternatively, they could be utilized for potential locations on the interactive map. The larger Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection consists of materials accumulated and donated by Rioghan Kirchner.

The Collection comprises a vast array of materials that have yet to be digitized associated with Brooklyn CORE, FOCUS, and other activist groups of the 1960s including original materials - photographs, documents, and other ephemera. Future course participants may choose to collaborate with Brooklyn Public Library Special Collections to digitize these materials and build a website linking to brklyncore.prattsi.org. This would function as a beneficial resource for BPL patrons and researchers while tying into the content displayed on the "Brooklyn CORE Oral History" website. There may be potential to integrate this content into the pre-existing website that our class has crafted. Through making a portion of the Civil Rights in Brooklyn Collection accessible as a community

resource, we strive to empower people to communicate their own stories, and preserve them as primary sources for future researchers.

References

Briston, H. (2015). Module 4: Understanding Copyright Law. In M. L. Behrnd-Klodt & C. J. Prom (Eds.), *Rights in the Digital Era* (pp. 7-68). Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists. Retrieved from course e-reserves.

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