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Article

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Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of Our School: A Youth-Led Participatory Heritage Project

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Abstract: This in-process project report describes a critical youth-led participatory heritage project that seeks to document, preserve, and make digitally accessible oral histories, archives, and artifacts of an urban, predominantly African American high school with a rich history and legacy. As a long-standing community institution, the narratives emerging from this high school are intricately connected with the larger story of the city of Philadelphia. This article uses an equity-based lens to demonstrate how youth-led participatory heritage can contribute to youth empowerment, critical consciousness development, and critical digital literacies. Implications for schools and communities experiencing gentrification, displacement, and community change are provided, including how participatory heritage with youth can utilize collaborative, asset-based efforts to foster change that allows youth and communities to have agency over their individual and collective stories, community history and legacy, and their futures.

Keywords: preservation, African American history, urban education, participatory heritage, youth empowerment, gentrification

> "*African American heritage is like a rock – solid, strong, steadfast and, for many years, silent*." JoyEllen Freeman.

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1 Prelude

Imagine an entire community gathering around the building that used to be their high school. The building is blocked off by covered construction fences, obscuring their view of the lower levels. Above the fence, onlookers catch a glimpse of the distinctive, turn of the century diagonal bonded brickwork (Figure 1), while local residents watch the changes in their neighborhood caused by gentrification in awed distress. Framed class photos are thrown away; school plaques, basketball jerseys, and other memorabilia once encapsulated in glass display cases throughout the school are unceremoniously destroyed. Historical artifacts are tossed from a window, down a chute, and into a dumpster by the construction developers. West Philadelphia High School, which has been an anchor of community pride since it became the first Philadelphia public school west of the Schuylkill River, is in the process of being emptied out and converted into high-end apartments. This development symbolizes the onset of gentrification, demographic shifts, and community change. Will we be forgotten? Who will ever know about our legacy? Who will remember us? Members of the crowd whisper to themselves as they turn and disperse, contritely, heads down, walking away in all directions.

2 Introduction

The previous vignette imagines an experience of a community contending with rapid gentrification and neighborhood demographic shifts that too often leave marginalized communities ruptured and with a feeling of discontent, and at the most deleterious level: displaced and excluded. This narrative provides an important backdrop for our critical youth-led participatory heritage project, titled *Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of Our School*. Our project revolves around the story of West Philadelphia High School (WPHS) and symbolizes the urgent need to preserve and

Figure 1: Picture of the former West Philadelphia High School after it was closed and emptied to become apartments.

widely share diverse cultural stories. WPHS is an urban, predominantly Black high school with a rich narrative indelibly entwined with the racial history of West Philadelphia. As many cities throughout the nation contend with similar situations of community change, inclusive of contending with the lingering impacts of gentrification and dispossession of land and cultural institutions, it is imperative that communities – and in particular the most marginalized – are given agency over the preservation of their historical archives and ownership over their future stories. In response, participation in cultural heritage activities and community memory projects aspire to capture and represent the lives of those living in diverse communities. Such intentional efforts can ultimately strengthen community empowerment if they are active participants and joint-partners in the preservation of their own cultural heritage (Goldenberg 2016, 47; Liew et al. 2020, 2).

Extant literature affirms the potential positive impacts of participatory cultural heritage. Museums and cultural heritage institutions (CHI) alike are exploring ways in which to engage marginalized communities in cultural heritage endeavors that emphasize a grassroots approach to community empowerment (Hancock et al, 2021, 1; Liew, Goulding, and Nichol 2020, 2). However, few have shown evidence of authentically engaging in justice-oriented and equity-based approaches, and even less have engaged marginalized youth as leaders and co-constructors of participatory heritage projects (Goldenberg 2016, 48). This thus lends itself to a gap in our understanding of the role and potential positive outcomes of youth serving as leaders of participatory cultural heritage. The purpose of our youth-led participatory heritage project is to preserve and share the history and long-standing legacy of WPHS through physical and digital preservation of archives and artifacts, and the collection of oral histories from alumni, students, teachers, administrators, and community members. Over the course of the last three years, our university-public high school partnership has built a team of a university professor, three graduate students, one undergraduate student, a high school teacher, and eight high school students. As a youth-led project, the high school students are the visionaries and executors of our project goals with university team members and the teacher serving as mentors and facilitators. As evidence of how we

value shared power, each member of our team is a co-author on the paper.

In this paper, we will discuss the historical context and background of our project, provide an overview of the extant literature and our conceptual framework, as well as discuss how our project has strived to empower our youth leaders and to inspire intergenerational collaboration, while also contending with the challenges associated with the many moving parts of engaging in participatory heritage with youth. In sharing both our successes and obstacles, we hope to encourage schools, CHI, and community-driven organizations to engage in participatory heritage projects to preserve cultural archives, particularly in communities where gentrification and marginalized residential displacement are prevalent. Our detailed experience report will address how our project emerged, its purposes, successes and challenges, and the future direction and implications of our collective work. We hope to provide a blueprint of how to envision and sustain similar participatory heritage projects to inspire youth, schools, and communities to evoke change and become empowered to have agency over their individual and community history and future narratives.

3 Background

Throughout history, public schools have served as institutional sites of social and cultural wealth as well as historical significance (Furman 2012; Yosso 2005, 77). Particularly within the African American[1] culture and tradition, schools have served as landmark symbols of a people's history (Ziegler 1974). These are the very communities resisting up out of enslavement and embodied within cultural institutions such as Black schools (Anderson 1988, 2). In the United States, historic preservation continues to be tainted by racial discrimination. Historic designation offers protection, funding, and support to preserve significant intellectual contributions of our nation's unique history and connecting the past to the present (Miller 2010). The African American story is one of resilience, prowess, family, community, and legacy – it deserves to be preserved in various capacities. For many African Americans, history can be traumatic; the widespread denial of their historic preservation contributes to the perpetuation of racial injustices deeming their experiences as "unworthy." While efforts to preserve African American history continue to face obstacles, this project seeks to encompass the myriad contributions of a local Black community representing strength, resilience, and success embodied within a school community. This project features stories of communal preservation efforts to expand both scholarship and institutional support of historically excluded populations in the face of historical, racial, and institutional discrimination. In contemporary educational settings, the socio-political and historical contexts that engulf the everyday lives of African Americans cannot be devoid. The narratives within the walls of WPHS diversify the field of historic preservation through documenting the West Philadelphia African American community and building towards a society of equity and reconciliation. This paper seeks to pay homage to the complex multigenerational history of WPHS and the West Philadelphia community more broadly. The story of the West Philadelphia community and the first public high school west of the Schuylkill River is an American story.

4 Historical Context

As the first Philadelphia high school developed west of the Schuylkill River, West Philadelphia High School (WPHS) has been a significant landmark since it was founded in 1912 (Figures 2 and 3). Since its inception, WPHS has become a symbol of community pride and of the rich and complex storied history that encapsulates the people, places, and things that represent the signs of the times. For example, West Philadelphia was considered a suburb in the early 1910s, home to wealthy and middle-class white Philadelphians who sought refuge from the increasingly overcrowded conditions of the city (Miller and Siry 1980, 99–146). At this time, no school existed in this part of town to serve the bourgeoning population of families and children (Orfield and Eaton 1996, 53). In 1912, the West Philadelphia High School for Boys and its adjacent High School for Girls was built. Today, the edifice of which still remains as the boys' and girls' entrances are permanent fixtures on the exterior building. The neighborhood and community served by WPHS was originally a predominantly white, working-class community of families, and included a large Jewish population, who had settled west of the city near several major manufacturing operations.

By the late 1930s, however, demographics began to change. The school began to witness the presence of its first African American students, many of whose families were participating in the westward expansion as their business

1 African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to encompass the diaspora of individuals from African descent.

Figure 2: Breaking ground on the site that would be West Philadelphia High School on August 10, 1911.

Figure 3: West Philadelphia High School near completion, June 12, 1912.

and professional communities experienced success during the first World War. The cyclical pattern of African Americans relocating to areas previously populated by white residents was apparent in West Philadelphia as white flight took off and white residents moved outside of the city to the northern and western suburbs (Clapper 2006, 246; Perkiss 2014, 68). The racial dynamics that ensued dictated the propensity for white residents to vacate the area in order to avoid living amongst Black residents or having their children attend schools with other Black children (Bell 1980, 527–528; Clapper 2006, 253; Perkiss 2014, 68). By the 1950s, West Philadelphia had become a predominately Black section of the city; however, the tradition of white residents who chose to relocate their homes to the suburbs yet travel into the city for work persisted, resulting in the teaching and administrative staff of Philadelphia schools remaining predominately white (Orfield and Eaton 1996, 53).

The story of this West Philadelphia community and its school represents a uniquely American story. Over the course of six decades, six million Black southerners moved their families to cities all throughout the north, east, and western United States signifying a collective national history of the Great Migration. Wilkerson poignantly describes the impact of the Great Migration:

> Its imprint is everywhere in urban life. The configuration of the cities as we know them, the social geography of Black and white neighborhoods, the spread of the housing projects as well as the rise of a well-scrubbed Black middle class, along with the alternating waves of white flight and suburbanization-all of these grew, directly or indirectly from the response of everyone touched by The Great Migration (2011, 10).

After the Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, KS decision of 1954, the integration of Black families into the school accelerated. Initially, the population of the school was equally mixed and integrated. However, overtime white families had practically all but disappeared. The West Philadelphia community and school became a tight-knit high achieving predominantly Black school (Thomas-EL 2019, 30). Over the course of the last 40 years, the story of WPHS syncs up with the ever-evolving story of West Philadelphia as "redevelopment" and "urban renewal" (or "gentrification" and "residential displacement") due in part to the expansion of neighboring anchor institutions, such as universities and hospitals, and the prospects of cheap land in a prime location. As a hotspot for redevelopment, Philadelphia – like so many urban epicenters – has been faced with the effects of racial and cultural displacement, particularly in a section of West Philadelphia that has been re(envisioned) to be named University City, and these gentrification efforts are leading to displacement of the Black families that have lived in West Philadelphia for generations (Thomas-EL 2019, 29–30). A school which once served over 5500 students now serves a total of 419 students, symbolizing the drastic demographic shifts in the community. As this African American community – and many like it throughout the nation – face rapid demographic and structural changes, the need for the preservation and memorialization of public history is gaining credence for scholars, practitioners, civic leaders, and cultural institutions.

5 Gentrification and Its Impact on WPHS

In various cities across the country, rapid gentrification (which is defined as the process whereby the character of a poor urban area is changed by wealthier people moving in, improving housing, and attracting new businesses, typically displacing current inhabitants in the process) and urban "revitalization" efforts are disrupting the existing African American community fabric through anchor institution expansion (Saksa), property tax increases, rezoning battles, and residential displacement (Herzfeld 2010, S260). These impacts have left many in the community feeling disempowered and in want of opportunities to ensure the community's survival (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, 85–86). In 2011, West Philadelphia High School relocated from its original location to a brand new school building which was designed by architect Emanuel Kelly, a WPHS alumnus. This relocation gave way to the original school building's renovation and repurposing into high-end apartment lofts with a hefty price-tag, pricing out many of the long-standing Black community members. One of the ongoing challenges faced by the redevelopment is the prospect of the history of WPHS being lost, or worse, not being valued or considered worth preserving. As shared in the opening vignette, the closure of the original 1912 school building was challenging for generations of alumni who had attended WPHS. Here was a school so intricately connected to the West Philadelphia community and its legacy, now standing as an exemplar of gentrification and facing imminent harm to the preservation of cultural heritage.

If steps are not taken to preserve the rich cultural history of WPHS, then the tangible and intangible heritage is likely to be lost. One of the most insidious aspects of gentrification is how it is often portrayed as "revitalization," thus implying that the community of residents, often residents of color, who lived in the neighborhood before

gentrification began, did not exist, or that their community had no capital (Alcalá 2019, 155). Youth involved in this project work together to assert their cultural capital and historical significance so people who move into the neighborhood of West Philly can have an opportunity to learn about the rich history of the community they are joining.

In the case of WPHS, much of the cultural history survives today thanks to a very active alumni association who hold a large collection of artifacts, such as yearbooks and memorabilia, saved from the original building, but the real trove of information lies in the memories of the alumni themselves. Although the alumni continue to meet monthly, hold large annual parties, and fundraise for the school, many of them report not feeling connected to the new school building and the current student body population. Additionally, not many of the current students at WPHS know about the alumni association and the events that they hold. One of the goals of our project is to facilitate more intergenerational dialogue, which allows current students to access the cultural history known by the alumni and allows alumni to feel more connected to the current students and school.

6 Conceptual Framework

6.1 Why Preserve Cultural Heritage?

Historically, cultural heritage preservation practices have been used to further the cultural capital of the powerful and the wealthy, but recent practices have taken a more democratic, social justice approach to collection and preservation practices (Lankes, Stephens, and Arjona 2018, S62). There is a burgeoning body of literature that notes how current systems of information preservation and distribution tend to favor dominant cultures of power in a way that disfavors the histories of marginalized communities and their access to information (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007, 87–89). For example, Gaztambide-Fernández recommends that social justice should be more focused on democratizing culture, which should be focused on "ensuring that communities have access to resources and opportunities for expanding local cultural practices as means of actively participating in a democratic society" (2013, 642).

However, projects that take a participatory approach to co-creating an empowered narrative with the "marginalized" culture are still rare (Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016, 57). Such projects are often interdisciplinary and try to include members of the participating culture in many stages of the preservation process to ensure that the result is an accurate reflection of the culture, not the author's interpretation, which is subject to bias (e.g. Achinte 2013, 443–68; Barrett 2015, 101–19; Sierra and Fallon 2016, 355–374). This approach creates an empowered narrative, which Shilton and Srinivasan define as "records and histories spoken directly by traditionally marginalized communities, embedded within the local experience, practice, and knowledge of that community" (2007, 90). Li suggests a theoretical framework for a Culturally Sensitive Narrative Approach (CSNA) for participatory heritage preservation in marginalized urban communities (2016, 137). These approaches require researchers to be creative with their methods, using tools such as oral histories (e.g. Hoare, Levy, and Robinson 1993 43–68; Lankes, Stephens, and Arjona 2018, S61–S68; Li 2016, 136–139) and digital media (Uricchio 2009, 135–146). Uricchio stated that "the challenges to those concerned with preserving cultural heritage are enormous. Not only must we move beyond familiar objects and homologies in our choice of what to save, we must also attend to the larger cultural shift towards participation and collaboration" (2009, 137). This literature reinforces the importance of cultural and historic preservation using an equity-based lens and grassroots approach to empowering marginalized communities.

6.2 Black Representation and Information Access in Urban Archives

A major new development in the field of archiving is the recognition that archival practices are not neutral (Cook 2013, 97; Dressler 2018, 47–48). With this development, there has been a push to democratize methods by encouraging more participatory practices such as co-creating archives or even supporting community archives (Cook 2013, 99; Zavala 2017, 202). A "community archive" can represent an officially registered non-profit, or it can be an informal, loose association of community members (Caswell et al. 2017, 7). At present, many archival researchers are documenting how archival efforts can be used in social justice and advocacy practices (Evans et al. 2015, 337; Poole 2020, 8–9; Sandler 2016, 87).

Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez (2016, 1) found that, in the case of one community archive, it was formed because of the difficulty of accessing information about the community's heritage prior to the archive's existence. In a more expansive study, Caswell et al. (2017, 6) contend that community archives have the potential to oppose the "silences, misrepresentations and marginalizations of mainstream repositories." Community archive founders often

begin their project because they feel, not only marginalized, but "symbolically annihilated" by mainstream information repositories and that these misrepresentations have negative social consequences (Caswell et al. 2017, 12). An important part of their mission is countering stereotypes.

Archival projects that are focused on the power of archiving as a medium for activism and social justice often use a critical research approach, such as Evans et al., who used archiving to resurrect histories that are inconvenient for those in power. Histories that many people would rather us forget, such as, in this case the cover up of the stories of children who were victims of sexual abuse (340). Community archiving with participatory practices has been used to create empowered narratives with marginalized urban populations of color. Conrad worked together with "at-risk" youth to create workshops with the aim at educating service providers (3). The youth created arts-based workshops in the form of poems, dramatized plays, collages, raps, drawings, and stories to explain their situations and needs. Conrad noted that "community engaged work necessitates an ongoing analysis of power, privilege, and oppression-a mediation of power differentials and questioning of what work is needed to sustain collaboration in terms of ownership, inclusion, accountability, and responsibility" (10). Wabende and Park describe an urban participatory project to preserve the traditional cultural art of African theater but with an application to contemporary Kenyan issues (323). They created traditional African theater performances with Kenyan youth to explore themes of current issues such as regional violence between an impoverished minority ethnic group and the wealthy urban Kenyan people.

Today, archiving tools such as cellphones with cameras and video/audio recorders are more readily available and the ability to share information through social and digital media is increasingly accessible. However, these various forms of media and technology alone do not democratize equitable and just archiving practices. For example, Sutherland demonstrated this using the example of photographs and recordings of the violent deaths of Black men such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and so many others, which she equates to images of lynching (2017, 36). These images have been reproduced in the way that they contribute to the internalization of fear and trauma in Black viewers, while also reinforcing white supremacist ideas of the dead "black body" in memory. Essentially, the digital "archiving" and reproduction of these images sensationalizes death, without honoring the life (Sutherland 2017, 38). In the same vein, Alcalá describes a community driven archive group in East Boston that is specifically aimed at documenting the displacement of Latinx community members. The group of community members found a partner in a local university library who were strongly committed to social justice (2019, 150). The author held training sessions for conducting interviews (testamonios) and then the community members collected oral histories (2019, 158). The partnership strengthened the resolve of the community group which was already well underway and empowered them with a new skill to support their efforts (2019, 162).

These projects demonstrate the ways in which community archives can benefit from collaborative partnerships with mainstream organizations. These collaborations offer training, advising, outreach, event organization, funding and fundraising (Poole 2020, 16). However, partnering with larger institutions means including stakeholders that may have their own priorities and community archives need to find ways to keep their own autonomy, while institutions need to find ways to establish trust (Poole 2020, 16).

6.3 Participatory Heritage with Youth

Our participatory heritage project utilizes elements of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and more specifically Critical Youth Participatory Action Research (CYPAR). While there is a growing body of research on CYPAR, less is known about participatory heritage projects with youth, and the ways in which participatory heritage with youth can support many of the tenets of CYPAR. CYPAR is a dynamic, co-constructed inquiry process that is designed to interrogate and transform systems and institutions to produce greater distributive justice (Cammararota and Fine 2010, vii). Our project is guided by a CYPAR process that seeks to democratize knowledge and yield power to our youth archivists (Lac and Fine 2018, 566), support their personal and social transformation (Cammarota and Romero 2011, 494), strengthen their voices to impact local institutions and policies (Dolan, Christens, and Lin 2015, 158), ultimately towards the end of becoming community change agents (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL 2018, 3). According to Ginwright (2010, 13), this process can foster youth's critical inquiry of their daily lives and experiences as well as develop liberatory practices. He contends that this process is both an art and method that ultimately engages youth in a democratic problem-solving process:

> The participatory process involves the intersection of art, science, and imagination. Equal in importance to the analytical skills developed through participatory action research, youth develop a collective radical imagination that is vital for community and

> social change … PAR forces researchers to re-examine what constitutes research, and shatters the brittle barriers that separate the scholar and artist in each of us (2010, 15).

Documenting and preserving the history of West Philadelphia High School operates at the intersection of art, digital media, and method. A participatory approach is important to ensure that cultural preservation does not result in negative consequences for marginalized populations. For example, Philips and Stein discuss how urban cultural preservation projects have the potential to lead to economic development but acknowledge that there must be "inclusion in programs for creating affordable housing with historic properties, or myriad other approaches for incorporating residents' needs into community economic development planning" (2013, 4). Simply preserving historic buildings does not automatically improve the lives of community residents. Additionally, researchers, museum professionals, and librarians must also be respectful of participants' time and should consider reciprocity, or giving-back, to the community (Blackmore 2017, 358). When critical participatory heritage with youth is actualized, the world is a more "human dwelling place" (Ginwright 2010, 4).

7 About Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of Our School

Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of Our School is a collaborative youth-led participatory heritage project. The project started in the 2018–2019 academic year when Ayana, a university professor, and Marie, a Career and Technical Education teacher, launched our project representing a public high school and private university partnership. The focus of the first-year programming was to support the development of youth-adult partnerships, youth empowerment, and the development of social-justice oriented youth identity (Allen-Handy, Thomas-EL, and Sung 2020, 4; Ginwright and Cammarota 2002, 83). This work organically developed into summer internship opportunities for youth, recruitment for oral history data collection, and virtual oral history preservation amidst a global pandemic. The youth in our project fluctuate between leaders and learners among the alumni.

Beginning in the summer of the first year and into the second year of the program, the youth began the process of conducting research into the history of their school by examining yearbooks and other artifacts held by the school and alumni association as well as interacting with current living alumni at local events. This project is supporting the students while they engage with difficult problems in their community, while also empowering them to take agency over their learning process (Lac and Fine 2018, 566) and to imagine solutions (Checkoway 2011, 343). Additionally, the strong critical lens employed during the first year of leadership development set a tone for a critical approach to our participatory heritage project in which students demonstrate knowledge of and resistance to the systemic forms of oppression that are causing the injustices that they uncover (Cammarota and Fine 2010, vii).

7.1 Our Team

Our team is an intergenerational team consisting of university and public high school stakeholders. From the university side there is a university professor (Ayana), three graduate students (Alysha, Karena, and Janel), and one undergraduate student (Destiny). From the high school, there is a high school teacher (Marie), and eight high school students who are the youth archivists on our project. Jahyonna and Ayanna are 2020 high school graduates, yet still work on the program as Alumni Fellows, and the other six students (Isaiah, Iminie, Qudia, Nehemiah, Anna, and Melissa) recently graduated in 2021. Our project breaks down traditional notions of power, by centering our youth as the thought-leaders of our project. Ayana, Marie, Janel, Destiny, Jahyonna, Ayanna, Qudia, Anna, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Iminie, and Melissa identify as Black/African American. Alysha identifies as white and Karena identifies as Latina. In its third year of existence, our project is focusing on collecting additional oral histories, furthering our online archives, recruiting future participants, and sharing our project through academic conferences and papers. Our team meets weekly, and the project serves as a co-curricular project which takes place during their computer science class which is taught by Marie. Gratefully, we were able to keep our regular meetings virtual during the pandemic (See Figure 4)

7.2 Oral History Team

The oral history team consists of Jahyonna, Anna, Melissa, and Ayana, and it is committed to capturing the rich legacy of WPHS through recording personal stories, narratives, and experiences of alumni, former teachers, administrators, and staff members. According to Ritchie (2014, 126), memory is the core of oral history. Thus, oral history research collects memories and personal commentaries, and holds these stories close in an effort for the stories to be

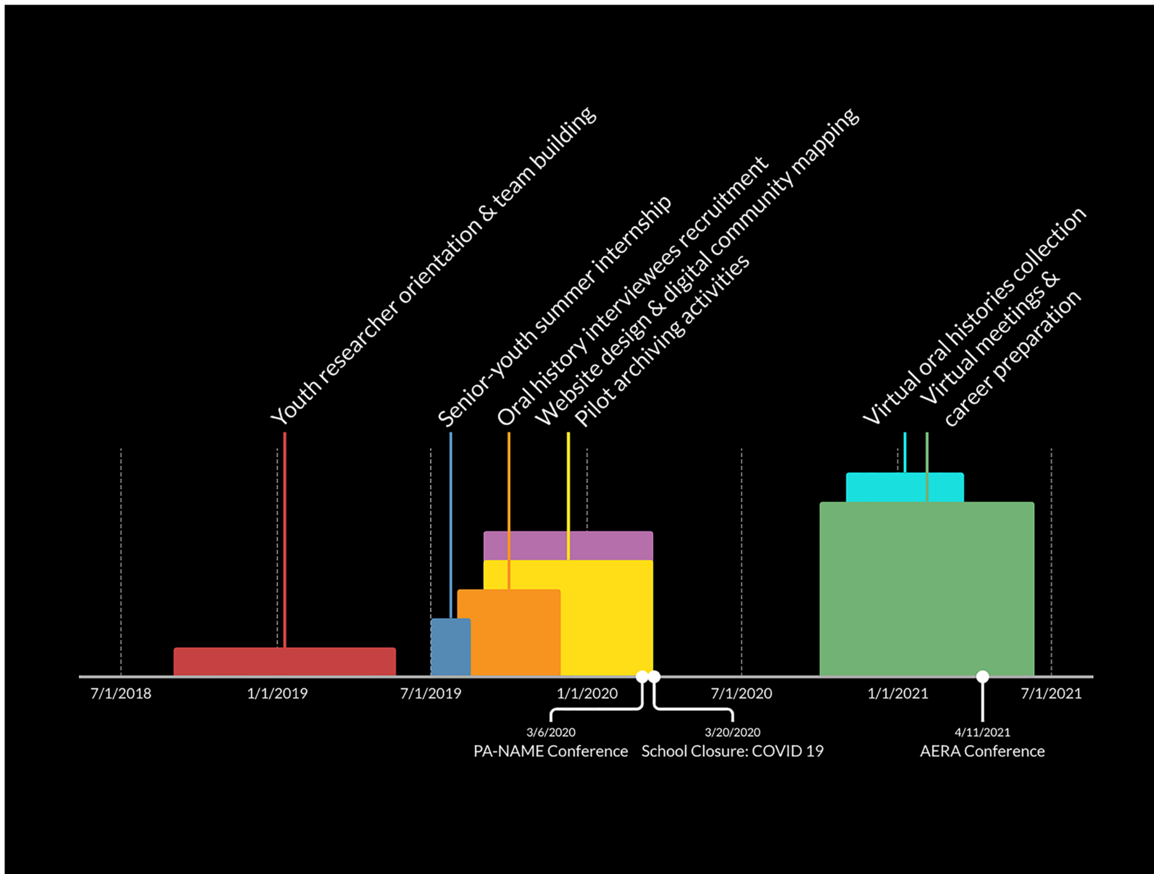


Figure 4: Timeline of project activities starting with inception in 2018.

preserved and not forgotten. Our commitment to the collection of oral histories centers from the belief that individuals live storied lives, and that those stories can illuminate the socio-cultural context within which the individual is embedded.

Part of the oral history team's focus is to make connections between the various oral histories, historical events, and how together they tell a rich story that maps onto the historical journey of WPHS. Prerequisite to and essential throughout the oral history process are the ethical implications that collecting and preserving oral history require. Therefore, integrity and trust are imperative to employ throughout this process, particularly when bridging intergenerational gaps between our youth archivists and alumni of WPHS. Our team has had the privilege and opportunity to interact with and collect oral histories from alumni ranging from alumni who graduated in the 1960s and 1970s to more recent alumni. We have attended Alumni Association meetings, the annual West Fest Alumni Event, as well as other informal meetings and conversations with alumni. We also collected oral histories virtually during the pandemic.

One of the primary tasks of the oral history team was to develop the protocol for interviewing alumni. We worked on this during several class periods, along with Ayana as the adult facilitator. Jahyonna suggested that the protocol should have different options for the various generations of alumni who we were interviewing. Therefore, we designed the protocol so that certain questions would be applicable for everyone, such as "do you feel that you are the same person you were in high school," while some questions were specific to different time periods, "how did you feel about the natural hair movement of the 70s?"

This aspect of the project has facilitated strong outcomes associated with intergenerational dialogue. On the one hand, youth who are primarily responsible for conducting oral histories with the alumni learn about the experiences of previous generations and bond over their high school antics. On the other hand, alumni who may feel disconnected from the current generation of students see shining examples of talented and motivated youth leaders. For example, in one of our interviews, an alumna who had graduated in the 1970s shared a story of her friends getting into some youthful trouble on a class trip and getting into

some good trouble while protesting a teacher who refused to teach African American history. The youth researchers and alumna laughed together at the shared realization that all teenagers experiment with a little rebellion. After this moment of levity, there was a silent realization that two generational stereotypes had been fractured. The youth saw that despite the fact that the older generation always seemed to "act right" and have all the answers, they too were teenagers who didn't always live according to the rules of their own elders. Simultaneously, many of the alumni who meet our youth researchers mention being impressed with how professional and intelligent the youth are.

7.3 Digital Literacy Team

The digital literacy team is comprised of graduate students Karena, Qudia, Nehemiah, and Janel who are tasked with creating a digital presence for the project. Our digital literacy students created digital narratives about WPHS and the local community through visual artifacts from both spheres. The students created a special team name, which created a joyful camaraderie amongst team members as they designed our website content and visual narratives.

Through the catalog of visual artifacts from WPHS, students upload those images on to the WPHS website for members of the community to observe and engage with the artifacts included on the site. Our project is utilizing the Youth Historians in Harlem as an archival model for our project. Future projects of the digital literacy team are to develop our project logo and marketing images, conduct community mural and arts mapping utilizing that tie in with the narratives of attending WPHS and lived experiences from their perspective communities. Furthermore, through digital storytelling and narratives of community, our project seeks to close the information access gap through creating opportunities of access.

During the 2019–2020 school year the university partners were working to fundraise for many of our digital needs such as archival software, a server or means of hosting our website, and a finding aid. This meant that the Digital Literacy team had some flexibility in their curriculum for our meetings. The youth did work to further the public facing part of the project while also developing important preservation skills in digital literacy. For example, students gave input into the design of the website by creating a prototype and wire frame of an unpublished website and brainstormed which items would fall into what menu items. They also practiced uploading a sample of scanned images. Additionally, they were invited to explore topics of their own choosing when collecting information for the culture mapping project. Studies have shown that allowing youth to explore multimodal, digital literacies can enable them to practice agentic action, especially when they are working on topics that are meaningful to them (Lee et al. 2019, 165). The digital literacy team was invited to spend some of their sessions conducting community asset mapping. In this activity the team used a mapping website to explore the streets of the neighborhood around their new school and the old school building and save sites that they researched to be important heritage sites to a map that they plan to feature in a section of the website.

7.4 Archiving Team

The archival team is composed of Alysha, Ayanna, Iminie, and Isaiah. It has the important task of preserving and digitizing the artifacts that are in the possession of the WPHS alumni association. Currently these artifacts include the complete collection of yearbooks from every year of the school's existence from 1912 to the present. They also have a near complete collection of the school's journal and newsletters which underwent several design iterations across the school's history. At some points, the students published a quarterly news periodical, but some class cohorts were more or less ambitious with their publications. The completeness of the student-published periodical collection is currently unknown.

The team has more artifacts to be archived. For instance, the alumni association also has a number of miscellaneous paper artifacts such as class photos. There is also a collection of newspaper clippings that were collected by an employee in the school administrative offices and donated to the alumni. Additionally, there are a number of trophies, plaques, and awards that were recovered from the old building. These artifacts are, as of now, secured in the administrative offices of the new building, under the supervision of the alumni association.

The alumni have taken care of their charge; however, accessibility poses a significant problem. Many of the periodicals and miscellaneous paper artifacts are kept boxed in a closet. There may have been an organization system in place, but this was lost during the move to the new building. Currently, there is no finding aid or numbering system and it is difficult to locate specific publications, except in the case of yearbooks, which have been clearly organized in date order (Figure 5). It is also not possible to access the area where these paper artifacts are kept without being

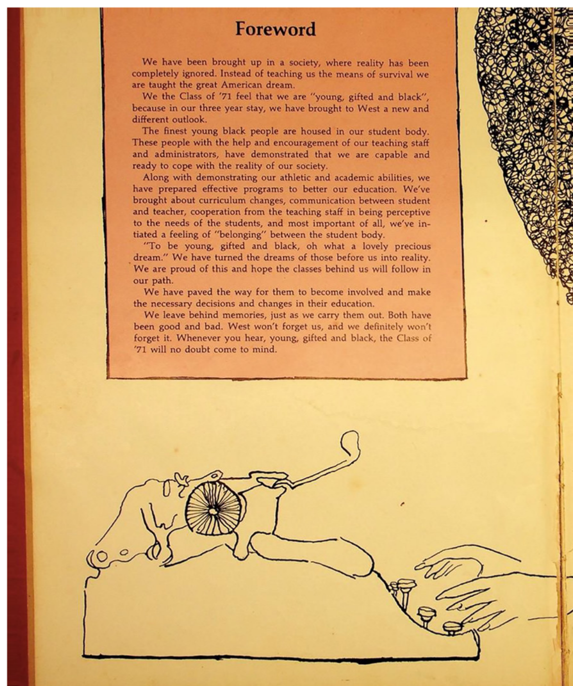
granted permission from the alumni association, or someone in the current administrative offices, therefore, digitization is an important task of our project as it will improve information accessibility. However, despite these restrictions, the paper collections are in good shape and not at significant risk.

The physical objects are also kept in the secure office of the current high schools' administrative offices. However, due to their size, some of these boxes are being stored in the mail area, which is slightly less secure. Some of the objects show normal wear and tear and signs of aging, however there are others that have distinct signs of damage. It is theorized by some of the alumni that a lot of this damage occurred during the move. Additionally, it appears that there was a previous attempt at cataloging the physical artifacts. Many of the 3D artifacts have been given makeshift alphanumerical numbers that we found taped to the artifacts. Unfortunately, the responsible parties utilized standard packing tape, and a lot of it, which poses a particular risk to preservation. The alumni that we spoke with did not know where the labels came from, who was responsible, or to what finding aid the alphanumeric labels refer.

The team set up a document scanner in the computer science lab in the school and, after a demonstration on proper handling, were able to scan one of the yearbooks as a pilot of the technology. The activity was successful in that we were able to scan a full yearbook during one class period (Figure 6). Now that we have scanned the pilot yearbook successfully the archival team hopes to get access to the rest. This has proven to be difficult because the alumni association is very protective of their collection of yearbooks, and rightly so. Many of these yearbooks are literally irreplaceable as there is no way to order new copies of them. We hope to soon come up with an agreement for a borrowing policy that they would find acceptable, perhaps a one-in-one-out process. In addition, the team did not have access to the yearbooks and other physical artifacts during the pandemic.

The archival team has also scanned some school photographs, trophies, and even graduation t-shirts. As of now, we are not removing the package-taped labels until a safe process for removal can be determined. Overall, archiving students are learning the basics of preservation, safe handling of artifacts, and the importance of developing a system of organized storage. Additionally, we are

Figure 5: Shelf of the Alumni area in the new WPHS building holding issues of school newsletters from the 1920s–1940s.



Foreword

We have been brought up in a society, where reality has been completely ignored. Instead of teaching us the means of survival we are taught the great American dream.

We the Class of '71 feel that we are "young, gifted and black", because in our three year stay, we have brought to West a new and different outlook.

The finest young black people are housed in our student body. These people with the help and encouragement of our teaching staff and administrators, have demonstrated that we are capable and ready to cope with the reality of our society.

Along with demonstrating our athletic and academic abilities, we have prepared effective programs to better our education. We've brought about curriculum changes, communication between student and teacher, cooperation from the teaching staff in being perceptive to the needs of the students, and most important of all, we've intiated a feeling of "belonging" between the student body.

"To be young, gifted and black, oh what a lovely precious dream." We have turned the dreams of those before us into reality. We are proud of this and hope the classes behind us will follow in our path.

We have paved the way for them to become involved and make the necessary decisions and changes in their education.

We leave behind memories, just as we carry them out. Both have been good and bad. West won't forget us, and we definitely won't forget it. Whenever you hear, young, gifted and black, the Class of '71 will no doubt come to mind.

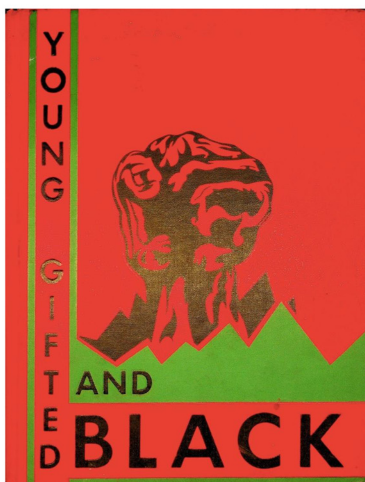


Figure 6: Cover and forward page of the class of 1971 yearbook scanned for digital preservation.

learning digital skills, such as using a scanner, developing a system for labeling digital files, and testing and matching color and contrast. For example, they had an interesting interaction when scanning a photograph of a basketball team from the 1960s when the high school was fairly evenly integrated with both African American and white players. When the youth archivists scanned the picture, they noted how, if the contrast was set too high, the African American players' faces were too dark to see, but if the contrast was too low, one could not make out the detail of the white players' faces. Archival students also learned content about the history of their school and the alumni. As the students were scanning the yearbook, they made comments about the content they were scanning. Some made humorous or admiring comments about the old-fashioned hair and clothes, but others noted how the school in 1971 had teams and activities that they don't currently have, such as fencing teams and bowling.

8 Implications

8.1 Implications for Youth Led Participatory Heritage

Our project centers on the brilliance of African American youth and the prowess of youth to lead their communities and their school. Sharing their powerful stories not only teaches and reminds youth of the myriad accomplishments from their heritage and their ancestors, but offers a critical focus on the diligence and hard work that strengthens the legacy of African Americans in West Philadelphia. This information is critical to share with others to highlight the struggles that African Americans have endured; the publication of oral histories further illuminates buried truths that span beyond the walls of a classroom.

Additionally, this project seeks to elevate the field of participatory heritage and specifically participatory heritage with youth in significant ways. This work contributes to the existing literature that supports the process of preserving historical sites and artifacts (Miller 2010; Ziegler 1974). Historic preservation is a process that local community and youth-led preservationist groups can advance through public, university, and institutional ties. The role of historic preservation can derive benefits that directly impact communities such as our West Philadelphia community. While the impact of gentrification has shown how cultural heritage can be threatened by prioritizing architectural developments, preservation can foster grassroots support that prioritizes support for local history. We still have a long way to go in addressing racial inequity, but we,

as the authors, hope this work will contribute to manifest a more just and equitable society.

8.2 Implications for African American School and Community Preservation

We hope to inspire more advocacy for community preservation. Specifically, we hope to empower the rich African American history by encouraging schools and institutions to prioritize preservation that leaves a positive impact on the community and its residents. In the future, traditional schools can adopt additional interdisciplinary and informal learning spaces to expand opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular activities. Cultural institutions can also develop university-community partnerships to empower communities with agency.

School and community preservation can be elevated through strong partnerships that advocate collaboration and recognition. For example, the youth-leaders enrolled at WPHS and who participated in our project satisfied literary graduation requirements and their required senior projects. This partnership benefits students by recognizing the significant contributions and sacrifices made by them as youth archivists. As the last three years of the project are only the beginning, moving forward, the project will continue to evolve as youth leaders pass it down to younger generations. New leaders will emerge and the legacy of WPHS will prevail.

8.3 Implications and Future Directions of Our Project

As activists, we return back to the opening quote to reiterate that a project such as this pushes back against African American history being silent … although still steadfast like a rock. This justice work also pushes back against a common archival narrative that privileges institutional knowledge and experience by demonstrating how a partnership between a university and a public high school can be successful. In addition, when such a project involves youth, the process of preserving these stories and bringing them into the 21st century serves the added educative process of digital literacies.

In order to preserve history and connect the past and present, we seek to support our youth as archivists building their critical consciousness as a result of being a part of this project (Hancock et al., 2021, 1). One's development as a critical scholar is an ongoing journey which could be measured by their future endeavors in civic engagement, community leadership, and social activism, although this is out of the scope of this paper. Future directions of this project include nominating the school for the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation to gain additional resources in educating a larger audience on the importance of community preservation.

One important lesson that we have learned was the importance of being creative in our collection practices (Poole 2020 5; Uricchio 2009, 137). The teachers and student researchers got a lot of responses from the community when they volunteered to staff booths at alumni association events. However, one of the main concerns for community archives is sustainability, because many times these projects rely on the drive of individuals (Poole 2020, 18). This project is no exception. Although the archival collection of the alumni association is not in immediate danger, and the motivation of the alumni to share their oral histories is unwavering, the youth-led effort to increase accessibility of this history by collecting, digitizing, and publishing information relies on the efforts of Ayana and her connection and partnership with Marie. Jahyonna and Ayanna who were heavily involved in the project are currently in their first year of college and the remaining youth who were sophomores at the beginning of this project recently completed their senior year. Thus, we are in the process of recruiting new students with the support of team members, now alumni as they will mentor and guide new project participants.

To add to this imminent loss of valuable team members, our project was completely uprooted by school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. After drafting this initial publication, all oral history activity and scanning had to cease as in-person school and alumni activities have been cancelled since the onset of the pandemic and the School District of Philadelphia is still operating fully remotely. Gratefully, we have been able to continue our oral history collection and our digital literacies components of the project. The archiving team members have supported the work of each of these teams.

Working within a participatory heritage with a youth project is never straightforward and simple. However, the benefits far outweigh the challenges and throughout our process we often aspired to glean from Liew, Goulding, and Nichol (2020) for inspiration and motivation to persevere: "participatory practice has the potential to give dignity to the many and various ways people engage with and explore shared and/or personal history and heritage. In seeing 'non-experts' as both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about collective memories and heritage, and inviting them to take a greater role as contributors, collaborators, or

partners, Cultural Heritage Institutions (CHIs) could gain from such partnerships" (2020, 5). Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to say that our team and project has faced outstanding challenges as aforementioned. Before we departed to adhere to quarantine guidelines due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, our project had incredible momentum. The entire team served as the featured presenters at a conference on multicultural education at a local institution. The youth researchers led every aspect of our presentation in front of a large audience of scholars and teachers in which they made more connections to help with the project and discussed their future goals of attending college and seeking employment after high school. In the spirit of reciprocity in a youth-led participatory approach, the university team has also provided college application and financial aid advice and support as our students carve out their lives and educational journey post high school. One of our proudest moments to date was receiving the Phillip B. Lindy Award for Excellence in K-16 Partnerships from the Philadelphia Higher Education Network of Neighborhood Development (PHENND) in 2021. In closing, it is a true honor to be an intergenerational and multiracial team being led by the youth (who are our future) in solidarity, preserving the history for the persistent legacy of our school.

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