The Great Lakes Social Studies Journal

Volume 4 - Issue 1 - Spring 2024

Destination: Democracy

But the Memory Remains

Teacher Education with Local Archives

Seth A. McCall
Cedyiesha Pope
Gloria Shaw

In the 1950s, urban renewal meant the destruction of Black Bottom in Detroit. A highway connecting Detroit to the suburbs replaced the predominantly Black neighborhood. Unfortunately, projects like this unfolded in many different cities, marginalized communities seemingly destined to be forgotten. However, local archives, like the Black Bottom Archives, attempt to resurrect the memory of Black Bottom. Drawing on Nora's (1989) differentiation between memory and history, this paper suggests that these archives offer essential resources for teachers. With examples from preservice teachers engaged with the Black Bottom Archives, this paper provides an example how local archives were used by preservice teachers as a resource to integrate local memory into the curriculum as a way to recognize students as heirs to a significant tradition.

Freeways and Reparations

In the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration provided federal funding to support the development of a national highway system. Not only would it provide infrastructure for the exchange of goods and services, it would provide easy access for the military to disperse forces through the territory. In Detroit, elected officials used the highway funding to address another concern. They drove the highway through two predominantly Black neighborhoods: Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. The newly constructed I-375 erased these neighborhoods from maps, dispersed communities of support, and provided a literal off-ramp for White Detroiters to head for the suburbs.

Recently, the federal government provided a new round of funding for the city of Detroit to transform I-375 into a broad avenue. While many describe this as a remedy for past injustices, it fails to repair the harm as it does not remunerate the survivors of the destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. Instead, the transformation of I-375 provides investment opportunities for the wealthy and a complex avenue to cross for locals. Although some claim it is difficult to find the survivors, the Black Bottom Archives appear to do that work.

Over the years, many locals endeavored to keep the memory of Black Bottom alive, even after a highway was paved over it. The Black Bottom Archives, funded by Allied Media Projects, engages with the memory of Black Bottom, foregrounding the perspective of Black Detroiters.

Recently, the project received additional funding to expand its work to Paradise Valley (Green, 2023). According to their website, the Black Bottom Archives "is a community-driven media platform dedicated to centering and amplifying the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black Detroiters through digital storytelling, journalism, art, and community organizing with a focus on preserving local Black history [and] archiving our present" (Black Bottom Archives, 2024a, para. 1.). The Black Bottom Archives include a digital archive comprised of a historical map, historical figures, historical sites, and oral histories based on interviews conducted with people who lived in Black Bottom in the 1940s and 1950s. Beyond the digital archive, the Black Bottom Archives also include short videos focused on memories of Detroit, featured writing

from guests, the Black Bottom Street View exhibit, a youth archival fellowship, and the Sankofa Community Research project.

The Sankofa Community Research project engages with Black perspectives on reparations for the harms caused by building I-375. This topic is particularly salient because of the federally-funded "I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project." With this project, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) "plans to convert the depressed I-375 freeway in Detroit to a street-level boulevard" (Michigan Department of Transportation, 2024, para. 1). As MDOT explains it, the redesign will lead to "a smaller footprint and enhanced connectivity" (Michigan Department of Transportation, 2024, para. 3). Some even used the idea of reparations to sell the project. For example, Transportation Secretary Buttigieg claimed, "it's important because it addresses the damage done to a mainly Black community through the gash that was created in it that was I-375. That didn't have to be built that way" (Burke & Beggin, 2022, para. 8). In the context of this type of argument, the Black Bottom Archives and their Sankofa Community Research Project serve an invaluable role in "explor[ing] Black Detroiters collective vision for reparations as part of the 'I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project'" (Black Bottom Archives, 2024b, para. 1).

Black Bottom: The Memory Remains

As citizens of cities like Detroit continue to deal with development projects that do not necessarily feel like progress, they raise questions about issues related to memory and history. Nora (1989) differentiated between these two terms. He describes memory as "life, borne by living societies founded in its name" (1989, p. 8). However, Nora describes history as "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (1989, p. 8). He argues that "[h]istory is perpetually suspicious of memory" (p. 9). For Nora, the two exist in an adversarial relationship. As the production of history accelerates, the existence of memory disappears. Modern memory's "new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon despoiling them there, as a snake sheds its skin" (1989, p. 13).

One might read this as a critique of archives, even the Black Bottom Archives. However, "if what [archives] defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them" (1989, p. 12). The Black Bottom Archives are not merely dedicated to history. Their mission and programming endeavor to rebuild the social networks that make collective memory possible. This is also the task that teachers take on when they teach about Black Bottom to children growing up in the remnants of the neighborhood, integrating the school community and its collective memory into the curriculum and recognizing their students as heirs to a significant tradition, a challenging task for teachers unfamiliar with the local past.

While the Black Bottom Archives provide an example of collective memory work that informs community activism and might inform public policy, it also raises a question. What is the role of community archives in teacher education? How might we prepare future teachers to utilize the resources offered in local archives to integrate local history into the curriculum and recognize students as heirs to a significant tradition? In seeking answers to our questions, we share the work we did with preservice teachers to provide them with a wealth of resources from local archives so that they could begin to experience how to integrate the school community into the curriculum and recognize students as heirs to a significant tradition.

Collaborative Curriculum Design Local Archives Project

In the Fall of 2023, 30 students enrolled in a social studies methods course within a larger elementary education program. Primarily undergraduates, the preservice teachers' demographics reflected those of the larger teaching profession—predominantly white and female. Most of these students will graduate and teach in the Detroit metro area.

Working with the Archives

Teachers, especially social studies teachers, have long found ways to engage their students with primary sources—such as conventional, digital, or ephemeral collections of archives. Experiences with primary documents can motivate students to learn about a topic, provide evidence of historical narratives, demonstrate details of the past, and share insights into experiences in the past (Barton, 2005). Building off the rich tradition of primary sources in the classroom, this project engages preservice teachers with local community archives to collaboratively design curriculum in preservice teacher education.

We first set aside time in class for the students to become familiar with the archive. Students worked in small groups to explore digital archives and then shared ways they considered using local archives in future curricula. After presenting to the class, the students received feedback from peers and the instructor. Next, individual students, guided by instructor feedback, designed lessons that integrated the archive in some manner. Finally, the students collaborated on designing unit plans that integrated the archival materials—again, with multiple opportunities to receive support from the instructors as they engaged with the archives.

Examples of Integrating Archives into Lessons on Black Bottom

One student planned to address standards related to engaging students in constructing a historical narrative to describe changes in the local community over time. After reading *Black Bottom Saints* by Alice Randall, the students would listen to the oral histories available on Black Bottom Archives. Students would then engage in oral history interviews within their communities. Another student focused on the positive and negative consequences of changing the physical environment of the local community. They designed a lesson to engage students in analyzing the characteristics of Black Bottom by using the Sanborn Map to follow a busy street in the neighborhood, noting houses, blocks, schools, churches, and community centers. The culminating activity involved students creating a Venn diagram to compare differences and similarities between the past and present in the area, hoping to acknowledge the memories that remain.

Reflecting on the Process

After engaging with the Black Bottom Archives, the students reflected on their experience. They recognized Black Bottom as a topic that most people do not get to study, some even describing it as an almost forgotten history. One student admitted that they did not expect to hear the voices of people who lived in Black Bottom, explaining that the tone of their voices helped them better feel their experiences. Another student compared the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1951 with a contemporary map. The older map included a sea of dwellings, rows upon rows of houses. They were struck by the vastness of the unfamiliar terrain, recognizing the blocks that once stood in an area that they knew stirred up much emotion.

Working with Archives

Using archives is challenging. First, the size of archives can overwhelm students, leaving them needing clarification about where to begin. Second., depending on the archive, some offer more curation than others. Additionally, perhaps most concerning are the unconscious biases preservice teachers will bring to the work. They might bring their dysconscious racism with them into local archives. Local archives do not necessarily fix the problem of racism. Lastly, preservice teachers do not come to this work naturally and need help getting started. To assist with these challenges, we offer the following recommendations:

- Front-load the experience by examining biases and assumptions.
- Design a project that requires students to use local archives.
- Introduce the archive to students.

- Visit the archive.
- Design projects that require students to use the archive.
- Scaffolding students' experiences by providing specific objectives may require curating specific documents, especially in designing lessons for young learners.
- Build partnerships with the community to share projects.

Conclusion

All across the country, cities grapple with the complex legacy of urban planning. While these projects fundamentally changed how people moved through cities, they often involved disparate impacts for historically marginalized groups. In Detroit, the city razed whole neighborhoods to make way for freeways that eased commutes out to suburbs and left the remaining neighborhoods with more pollution. In Detroit, organizations like the Black Bottom Archives try to keep the memory of the past alive. This memory is crucial as the city engages with federal grant funding for more large-scale city planning that some claim will repair decades of harm. Although the Black Bottom Archives keep the memory alive, schools must continue to play an essential role in supporting the work of generating a curriculum that largely overlooked, if not obscure, the local past.

Engaging preservice teachers with local archives allows them to get to know the local past. Although a few students were familiar with Black Bottom, most grew up in the Metro Detroit area without learning about the neighborhood. Working with local archives also allows students to engage with local memory. One student explained that they did not expect to hear oral histories from people who lived in the Black Bottom, but they found these voices helped them feel the experiences better. The lesson plans designed by these preservice teachers did not add a whole new unit to an already busy curriculum. Instead, they addressed state standards *through* the local past. Whereas pre-packaged, formal curricula market their materials to a broad audience, the lessons designed by these preservice teachers foreground local concerns, like the positive and negative consequences of constructing I-375. A curriculum that integrates local archives can allow students to engage in local memory work and recognize their role as stewards of a larger tradition.

References

Barton, K. C. (2005). Primary Sources in History: Breaking through the Myths. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *86*(10), 745–753. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170508601006

Black Bottom Archives. (2024a). *About the Archives*. Black Bottom Archives. http://www.blackbottomarchives.com/aboutthearchives

Black Bottom Archives. (2024b). *Sankofa Community Research*. Black Bottom Archives. http://www.blackbottomarchives.com/sankofaresearch https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916629164

Burke, M. N., & Beggin, R. (2022, September 15). Michigan gets $105M grant from feds to turn I-375 in Detroit into boulevard. *The Detroit News*. https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2022/09/15/michigan-gets-105-m-federal-grant-turn-375-detroit-into-boulevard/10380105002/

Green, R. C. (2023, October 11). Detroit's Black Bottom Archives is collecting oral histories of Paradise Valley descendants. *Detroit Metro Times*. https://www.metrotimes.com/arts/detroits-black-bottom-archives-is-collecting-oral-histories-of-paradise-valley-descendants-34352598

Michigan Department of Transportation. (2024, February 4). *I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project*. Michigan Department of Transportation. https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/projects-studies/special-construction/i-375-reconnecting-communities-project

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, *26*, 7–24.

Mentoring Preservice History Teachers at Cultural Institutes. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *72*(1), 113–125. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487120920251