

Reimagining Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward Through Poetry

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REIMAGINING HARRISBURG'S OLD EIGHTH WARD THROUGH POETRY

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses how poetry helped a digital history project go public. In the spring of 2018 Messiah College's Center for Public Humanities began hosting poetry workshops for Harrisburg middle school students that focused on the vanished community of the Old Eighth Ward. With the help of the 1910 federal census data accessible through the Digital Harrisburg website, students engaged this little-known history of their hometown through field trips followed by poetry workshops. As students imagined the world through the lens of a person in the Old Eighth Ward, they drew on their own experiences and imagination. Published and performed for diverse audiences in different venues, these poems invite a wider public to rethink the City Beautiful movement as they reimagine the once vibrant community.

KEYWORDS: Old Eighth Ward, Harrisburg, poetry, digital history, public humanities

It is in place that we locate ourselves, mark ourselves in relation with others; it is in place that we survive. But what becomes of the past when place is torn away, when the sensorium is radically displaced, and when exile or dislocation marks out the limits of existence?

Meena Alexander, "What Use Is Poetry?"

As the director of the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah College, I spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to engage students across disciplines in meaningful public projects. Many public humanities scholars champion digital projects as a new frontier for public humanities, so I had great hopes for the Digital Harrisburg Project as a platform for leveraging collaborative public humanities project.¹ I believed my history colleagues

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were on to something with the City Beautiful project. While several of our colleagues found it interesting, we struggled to find a way to connect to a public audience outside of the academy.²

The same year we launched the Digital Harrisburg project, the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah College initiated “Poetry in Place,”³ another place-based project. A partnership with Harrisburg City Schools, the goal of Poetry in Place is to cultivate middle and high school students’ connections to the rich cultural, historical, and ecological roots of Harrisburg through field trips to significant places in and around the city, which are followed by poetry workshops that invite youth to share their own perspectives and experiences of the city through poetry. Over the past five years students have written delightful poems about the places we visited, but students often found it difficult to bring their own experiences and imagination to history in generative ways.

This changed in the spring of 2018, when we hosted a series of poetry workshops focused on the Old Eighth Ward. Poet Marilyn Nelson’s book *My Seneca Village* sparked the idea for these workshops. The work is a wonderful collection of poems that bring voice and life to the multi-ethnic community in Manhattan razed in 1857 to make way for the construction of Central Park.⁴ Founded by free African Americans in 1825, Seneca Village had become a thriving multi-ethnic community by the 1850s. Nelson’s research for the book included maps and 1850 federal census data. As she noted in a recent interview, her goal was to empathize herself “into the imagined experiences of people whose experiences are not mine.”⁵

As I read Nelson’s poems, I was struck by the similarity of Seneca Village and the Old Eighth Ward. I recognized that through the Digital Harrisburg Project, we also had a wealth of easily accessible information that could assist our young poets to connect research and their imagination and take the same leap of faith. The timing seemed perfect. Sixth graders from Harrisburg’s Marshall Math Science Academy were slated to participate in our poetry workshops that spring and the school was eager to connect humanities and the arts to their STEM curriculum. An additional motivation was the fact that Marilyn Nelson would be on campus in April for a reading sponsored by the Paul Nisly Endowment for literature, vocation and reconciliation; we hoped these young poets would have a collection of poems to introduce Ms. Nelson to the history of our own long-forgotten community.

Messiah humanities students put their heads and their own imaginations together to consider how we might invite middle school STEM students to not just engage with, but also care about the history of the Old Eighth Ward. Messiah students Sarah Wilson Carter (public history) and Arion Dominique (history education) looked through the 1910 census for individuals of all ages, occupations, races, and ethnicities. They designed census cards for these individuals and collected photos that corresponded to the locations where they would have lived. Using the virtual walking tour map available on Stephanie Patterson Gilbert's Old Eighth Ward website, we planned our route around the Capitol Complex.⁶ We began the field trip at the train station, explaining that we were about to embark on a journey back in time to a place that no longer existed. While none of the Amtrak trains could take us to our destination, with a little research and a large imagination we could get there. Their job as poets would be to reimagine that place back into existence for their readers.

After distributing the census cards and the corresponding pictures, we made our way over to the Capitol Complex (fig. 1). That February day was especially bitter. Most of us were not adequately dressed for the cold, but the thrill of arriving at the place that once would have been home to their assigned Eighth Ward residents seemed to warm everybody up. As we made our way across the Capitol Complex, we used all our senses to help recreate the material world of the Old Eighth Ward in 1910. We stopped on State Street so we could imagine the smell of fresh bread coming from the Frederick J. Miller's Bread and Cake Bakery and then again on North Street to listen to the sounds of the children playing outside of the William Howard Day School. As we stopped at what we guessed was 608 South Street, we listened to a student read information about Washington Moto. We all marveled at what it would be like to be a waiter at a bustling restaurant all day and come home at night to the boarding house where you lived with twenty-seven others! Trying to conceive of a world before cellphones and earbuds, we wondered what would it be like to try to get to sleep at night when sharing a room with so many other people? As we made stops along the streets where their assigned residents lived, students discovered their neighbors and began constructing stories about how their lives might have intersected back in the old neighborhood (fig. 2).

At the same time that we called on students' imaginations to recreate the physical world of the Old Eighth Ward, we continually returned to the digital world to fill in gaps that pushed us further in our imaginations. Always armed



FIGURE 1. Students at Capitol Complex reading poetry. Photo by Daniel Smyth.

with their trusty smartphones, students pulled them out to decipher words like “mulatto” and occupations such as “cloak” models. When we returned from our field trip and settled into the warmth of our poetry workshop site, this back-and-forth between imagination and historical research continued. We pulled up the Digital Harrisburg website and examined the interactive maps so students could find other neighbors. Along with the digital maps, we filled the room with clotheslines and hung printed pictures of the buildings of the ward that Messiah College students had scanned from the State Archives. This allowed the students to go back and look more closely at what the Old Eighth Ward would have looked like as they wrote their poems.

Students wrote the first drafts of their poems with gusto. Several of them eagerly volunteered to read their poems for the group. As we asked students to discuss their creative decisions for their poems, it became clear that though the twelve- and thirteen-year-old students were unfamiliar with Harrisburg history or archaic words such as “cloak” or “mulatto,” their own life experiences gave them a remarkable critical edge about complex ideas such as “eviction,” segregated schools, or what it meant to be a “mulatto” in a world governed by white supremacy, ideas that continue to play out in their own neighborhoods today.

In her essay on the use of poetry, Meena Alexander explores the uneasy relationship of history and poetry, noting that poetry “is bound

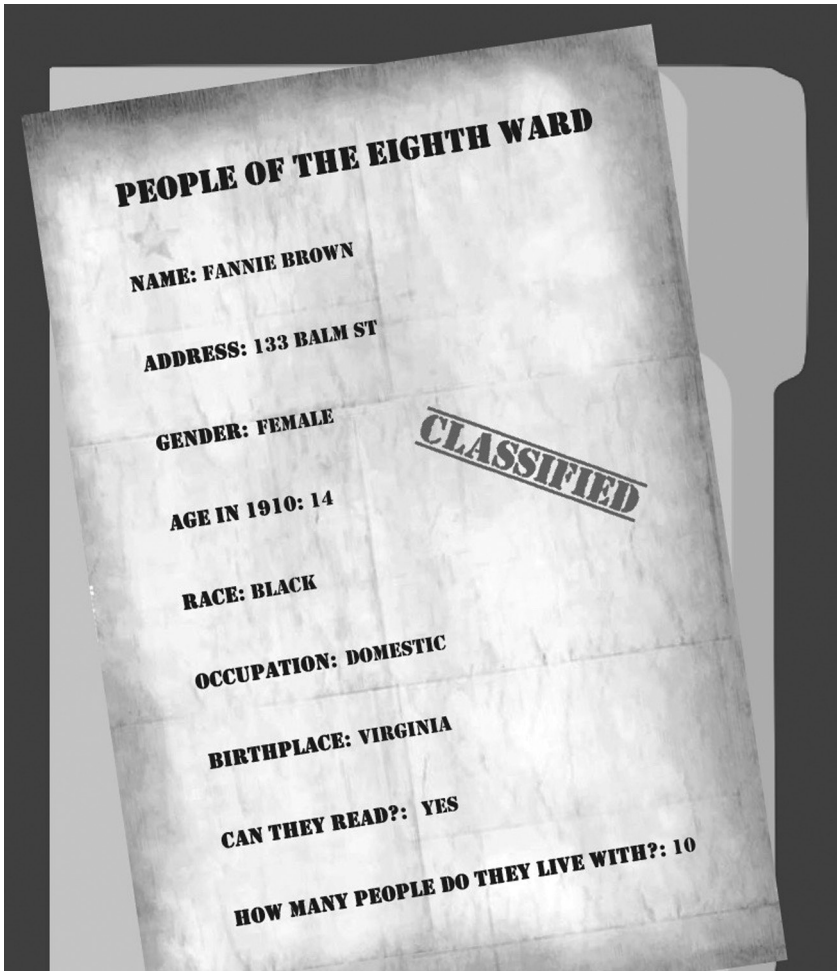


FIGURE 2. Fannie Brown census card. Courtesy of the Digital Harrisburg Project.

to the sensorium, to the sensual powers of bodily being, to memory that draws its power from feelings heightened by the senses.⁷⁷ Of course our middle school students had no *personal* memory to draw on. Like many Harrisburg citizens today, they were largely unaware of this chapter of Harrisburg history. However, with the help of Digital Harrisburg resources that provided concrete information about the place and people of the Old Eighth Ward, our young poets were able to tap into a collective memory as they imagined their way across generations and history and into the skin of an “other” bodily being.

We were thrilled that by the time Marilyn Nelson arrived on campus, we had several Marshall students eager to perform their poems for her at a dinner before the reading. As students read their poems, we were overwhelmed by their capacity to follow Nelson's lead in empathizing their way into the imagined experiences of others.⁸ Written at a time of deep racial divide and as the "Me Too" movement unfolded, these poems seemed especially empathetic and compassionate.⁹ In her poem about Rachel Murphy, a young white girl in the Old Eighth Ward, African American student Quartni Dorsey graciously imagines how difficult it must have been for Rachel to accept her white privilege:

I'm the weed in the garden
I'm the thumb, not the finger

I want to be like everyone else, but all they see is my skin.
My colored friends look at me and think I'm perfect;
they look at me and just see my money.
I wish everyone was the same color,
then adults wouldn't treat me special and the colored bad.

I'm the weed in the garden
I'm the thumb, not the finger

My folks tell me I'm no good,
cause I talk to the colored;
they say "They gonna trick you into the bad."
I don't believe them though.

I'm the weed in the garden
I'm the thumb, not the finger.

Equally as poignant, Savier Gonzalez, a Latino student, powerfully imagines the world through the eyes of fourteen-year-old Fannie Brown, an African American resident in the Old Eighth Ward:

What if I grow up to become a book writer?
Would anyone read me because of my skin color?
What if I grow up to become a musician?
Would I even have any fans because of my race?
What if I grow up to become a model?
I may impress my family, but would the whites think I was pretty?

For now, I'm stuck—a 14-year-old maid,
 cleaning rooms for white girls whose dreams may come true.
 But maybe, just maybe,
 If I keep chasing my dreams, I can make them come true.

Students also had the opportunity to tap into an even larger collective memory as they have been invited to perform their poems during events connected to the Commonwealth Monument Project.¹⁰ One of these events took place at McCormick Library, an unlikely place to find middle-schoolers on a Saturday in February 2019. I drove around town picking up students and as we prepared to enter the two-hour-long event I assured them they would be rewarded with pizza after their performance. Along with the poetry reading, the event included presentations on the Old Eighth Ward from historians Michael Barton and David Pettegrew. I was sure the students would get restless and start fidgeting during the presentations, but as David Pettegrew showed us Digital Harrisburg's map of the migrations of African Americans after the demolition of the Old Eighth Ward, followed by a redlining map of Harrisburg and pictures of restricted covenants from the West Shore, the students were visibly enthralled! Afterwards, as we ate pizza at a small restaurant just a few yards away from the Old Eighth Ward, they were full of questions about redlining and the policy-driven segregation of Harrisburg through restricted covenants and segregated housing projects built in the 1940s and 1950s. As we continued to talk, students began to connect the dots between the Old Eighth Ward and the fact that over 100 years later they attend an intensely segregated school.¹¹

It is no surprise that in a STEM school like Marshall Math Science Academy far more attention is given to the potential and promise of technology than the value of the humanities. Certainly, technology will be crucial for students' access in today's world, but if they are going to be agents of change in their communities, it is equally as important for students to understand the complex historical forces that have shaped their community. Through the Digital Harrisburg Project, these students have seen how digital tools can be used to analyze and interrogate history. Through the Poetry in Place workshops, they have discovered that as they bring their own experiences and language to this history, they can challenge the systemic injustices that still plague our nation and communities. This opportunity was not lost on Treshawn Bordner, who penned this poem in response to his discoveries

about Old Eighth Ward resident William Howard Day, an abolitionist and civil rights activist:

Every time I turn on
 The news another one of
 My buddies gone that
 I knew.
 White cops shooting black
 Folks, and black faces
 Touching hard ground.
 Handcuffs tight as
 ever,
 Prisons filling up,
 Isn't that enough?
 This isn't right
 We deserve better,

So I'm going to make
 a change in the world.

In July 2019, we lost Marian Dornell, one of the poets who facilitated our “Remembering the Old Eighth Ward” poetry workshop, as well as a descendent of one of the African American leaders of the Old Eighth Ward and citizens celebrated among the one hundred Names (see James B. LaGrand and David Pettegrew, “Harrisburg’s Historic African American Community” in this issue). The last time I saw Marian she could barely talk. With limited breath and energy, she carefully delivered her words so as not to waste even a syllable. I, on the other hand, was full of words. I had just attended the unveiling of the pedestal of the Commonwealth Monument dedicated to the African American community who lived in the Old Eighth Ward and I was eager to show Marian the pictures of her great-grandmother’s name on the pedestal, along with the video of Treshawn reading his poem in front of all the dignitaries at the unveiling. I reminded her of the magical moment during the poetry workshop when Marshall sixth-grader Wesley Pina held up a census card and read out the name “Hannah Braxton Jones,” who happened to be Marian’s great-grandmother. As I got ready to go that day, she reminded me that she still wanted to share the material about Second Baptist Church, the church her great-great-grandfather started in the Old Eighth Ward. I thanked



FIGURE 3. Marilyn Nelson and Marian Dornell with poets. Photo by Jean Corey.

her again for her generosity and all the knowledge, history, and good will she had shared with the Center for Public Humanities over the years. She sat up straighter, weakly held out a cupped hand, and said, “Thank you for always being there with both hands open for all I had to share” (figs. 3 and 4).

This I think is a wonderful metaphor for the symbiotic relationship between Digital Harrisburg and Poetry in Place. Drawing on the rich resources of Digital Harrisburg, Poetry in Place was able to invite middle-school students to connect research and imagination to their lived experiences in contemporary Harrisburg. Through students’ poems, we are all invited to rethink the City Beautiful movement as we reimagine the once-vibrant community of the Old Eighth Ward, a community displaced in the name of progress. In the midst of such sharing we have discovered deeper resources than we could ever imagine: the collective memories of our neighbors, a diverse, multigenerational community who are happy to join us as we work to document and share a history of a place that can indeed survive.

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FIGURE 4. Marian Dornell and young poet holding picture of Hannah Braxton Jones. Photo by Jean Corey.

humanities-based education and research. Dr. Corey's research and teaching focuses on writing and the intersection of ethnicity, race, religion and gender, service learning and pedagogy, and humanities and public engagement.

NOTES

1. Gregory Jay. "The Engaged Humanities: Principles and Practices for Public Scholarship and Teaching," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* 3, no. 1 (2010): 51–63; Paula M. Krebs, "Thinking about the Public," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 5, 2013.
2. Sheila Brennan points out that just because a project is digital does not necessarily make it public: "Launching a project website, or engaging in social media networks, does not make a project discoverable, accessible, or relevant to anyone other than its creator." Sheila A. Brennan, "Public, First," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 384–89. <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/83> (open-access edition).
3. See <https://poetryinplacecp.wordpress.com>.
4. Marilyn Nelson, *My Seneca Village* (South Hampton, NH: Namelos, 2015).
5. Cindy Ritter, "Q&A with Marilyn Nelson," *Publisher Weekly*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/69192-q-a-with-marilyn-nelson.html>.
6. The website is available still on the Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170629222353/http://www.old8thward.com/home.htm>.
7. Meena Alexander, "What Use Is Poetry," *World Literature Today* 87, no. 5 (September/October 2013): 17–21.
8. Nelson, in Ritter, "Q&A."
9. For a lovely reflection on the students' performance for Nelson, see Hannah Eckstrom's blogpost: <https://humanitiesinplace.wordpress.com/2018/04/12/852/>.
10. See David Pettegrew and James B. LaGrand, "Harrisburg, the City Beautiful: Recasting the History of Urban Reform in a Small American Capital," in this issue.
11. Schools are labeled "intensely segregated" if they are 90 to 100% nonwhite. Marshall is 97% nonwhite. See Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, and Gary Orfield, "Harming Our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years After Brown," The Civil Rights Project, May 10, 2019, <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>.