

2012

Civil Rights and Education in Richmond, VA: A Documentary Theater Project

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Recommended Citation

Browder, Laura, and Patricia Herrera. "Civil Rights and Education in Richmond, VA: A Documentary Theater Project." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 23, no. 1 (2012): 15-35.

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CIVIL RIGHTS AND EDUCATION IN RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

A Documentary Theater Project

In 2010, we launched a five-year project “The Fight for Knowledge: Civil Rights and Education in Richmond” at the University of Richmond. The center of this endeavor is a documentary theater course, “Civil Rights and Education in Richmond: A Documentary Theater Project,” that each year focuses on a different aspect of educational history in Richmond.¹ The first year we researched and performed a play that offered an overview of segregation, desegregation, and resegregation in the city’s public schools. Struck by the stories of two white alums of George Wythe, a high school that had undergone major transformations in the past several decades, in the second year of our class we took a more focused approach and addressed a single year—1974–1975, the year that busing began.

We focused on George Wythe High School for several reasons: it had once been the school where the city’s middle-class white residents sent their children. Integration began very slowly in the late 1960s, and then in 1974, court-ordered busing began (although, as we quickly learned, this did not mean that school buses were involved—rather, some students had to travel two hours each way on city buses to get to their assigned schools). For a few years, the school was integrated, and then it became, as it is today, almost all African American.

Late in the fall of 2011, Salvador Barajas, a doctoral fellow who was building a digital archive for our project, came to us with a curious problem. He had been visiting Richmond institutions, such as the Library of Virginia, the public library, and Wythe High School, the subject of this year’s play, in search of old yearbooks and school newspapers that could illustrate the transition that Wythe made as it moved from being an all-white school to being integrated to being all black. Much to his dismay, he could not find anything from the sixties, seventies, or beyond: neither the libraries and museums nor the school itself kept these materials. The many phone calls he made to public school administrators and librarians went unreturned. The archival absence of Wythe’s history revealed that there was a complex and painful aspect of the city’s past that few wanted to speak about. This history continues to reverberate in the present.

Virginia has a long history of segregation in public schools. In 1954 Senator Harry Byrd, Sr. opposed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision

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¹ The course was originally titled “Massive Resistance: A Documentary Theater Project.” We learned very quickly that we had wrongly assumed that students knew what the term “Massive Resistance” meant and it made us realize how far removed this era was for some of our students. Not one student in the class had heard the phrase “massive resistance” which defined Virginia’s defiant response to school integration. The state closed down public schools rather than integrate—in some communities, schools shut down for as long as five years. To better reflect the scope of this course, we have renamed it “Civil Rights and Education in Richmond: A Documentary Theater Project.”

to integrate schools and called for “massive resistance” to the court’s ruling. Virginia’s refusal to desegregate continues to affect Richmond’s public schools, especially since educational inequity persists along racial and socio-economic lines. Public schools in Richmond continue to be largely segregated—only 7 percent of white parents in Richmond enroll their children in public schools—but apart from occasional newspaper articles in the local press, the connection between segregationist laws lasting through the middle of the twentieth century, and the segregation that exists in schools today is largely unexplored in public discourse (“Urban Public Schools”; Williams; and “Schools Must Fix”).

The erasure of this history was our greatest challenge—whether the silence came through the absence of archives in the public schools documenting this history, or through the discomfort of our students, who were not always comfortable either discussing charged racial issues—or, more to the point, embodying what were to them deeply upsetting racial attitudes in the plays they wrote and performed that were based on evidence and interviews from the time. The discomfort and even hostility came through in the resistance of one white student who would check his Facebook or sleep through group interviews with black people who were talking about some of the most painful and fraught aspects of segregation and desegregation. Both the black and white interviewees were also sometimes uncomfortable. They wanted to nostalgically celebrate their high school years yet had a difficult time talking about the eruptions of racially-motivated violence that they experienced or witnessed.

Whether this erasure was conscious or unconscious, we wanted students to understand the era of desegregation, integration, and resegregation in Richmond not solely by reading about the history, but also by enacting it. In reenacting history, participants can begin to become more intimate with people’s lives, their situations, and their relationships to society. In creating a documentary theater piece participants venture into new processes of knowledge-making and learning. The art of capturing and conveying memory, life, and culture through any medium, in this case theater, allows us to represent and reflect on a specific moment or struggle. Such documentation can shape, aid the recollection of, and expand particular histories. While several films, such as *The Ground Beneath Our Feet* and *Locked Out*, document the era of segregation, integration, and resegregation, there are few plays that document this history. The process of making documentary theater demands that participants not only learn about the history, but also embody it, if only temporarily.²

Our goal was to have students spend fifteen weeks reading primary and secondary sources on the history of “massive resistance” to segregation, conducting archival research and oral history interviews, and studying examples of documentary dramas. They would then collaboratively write and produce a play based on that research. The first month of the semester focused on familiarization with the history of desegregation, integration, and resegregation in Richmond. We began with viewing *The Ground*

² For more on documentary theater see Forsyth and Megson, and Dawson.

Beneath Our Feet: Massive Resistance, and reading Robert A. Pratt's *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond Virginia 1954-89* to provide a basic history of Richmond's education system. After a month of collecting raw material from the archive, we proceeded with the interview process. We anticipated that community-based learning would bring our students out of their bubbles of privilege. We did not foresee that seeing their high school experiences acted out on stage would also change the perspectives of the Wythe alums.

Engaging—and Being Engaged by—the Community

Community-based learning has become a trend at universities around the country, and in many cases, community engagement has become a useful public relations tool for universities that have vexed histories or difficult current relationships with the communities that surround them. Yet community engagement is also a fruitful way for universities to transform not only their relations with the surrounding community, but also their own institutional cultures. At the University of Richmond, community engagement has become a centerpiece of the institution's mission, spelled out in a document called "the Richmond Promise" (University of Richmond). The Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, founded in 2004, "serves as the hub for coordinating community engagement at the University of Richmond, connecting the university and Greater Richmond region communities through collaborative, sustained, and educationally meaningful responses to community-identified needs" ("Inauguration of Edward L. Ayers"). When the university's new president, Ed Ayers, was inaugurated in 2008, he promised that "we will focus on preparing our students for lives as engaged citizens—and the institution as a whole will become a more fully engaged citizen in the community where we live, a community that has shaped our identity in fundamental ways" ("Inauguration."). Although establishing the Bonner Center was an enormous step forward for the university, the University of Richmond still has an image in the community of white privilege and intellectual elitism.

This reputation is not wholly inaccurate. Although three years ago the university shifted to a need-blind admissions policy—a program that has greatly increased the number of first-generation college students there—tuition, room, and board each year cost \$54,000. The makeup of the school has historically been overwhelmingly white and wealthy. It was not until 1968 that the first African American student to live in a dormitory on campus enrolled. Students generally live on the idyllic, beautifully landscaped campus, and many of them rarely venture into the city of Richmond.³

The university addresses student disconnection from the community by funding faculty fellowships to create community-based learning courses. We were in one such group of seven fellows, led by community-based learning manager Terry Dolson. Through our work with this group it became

³ The Admissions Office at the University of Richmond reported the class profile of 2016: US students of color: 25% of the class; Students who grew up speaking a language other than English: 18% of the class; First-generation college students: 12% of the class. ("Class of 2016 Overview")

clear to us that one very distinct feature of the Center for Community Education (CCE)'s approach to community engagement was through nurturing long-term relationships with community partners. We were convinced that we needed to make a long-term commitment to the project, and the university supported our proposal to teach the course for five consecutive years. While one downside of working with wealthy students is that they can be insulated from the challenging realities of others' lives, there are clear advantages to working at a well-funded institution. Without the school's fiscal support, and commitment to a sophisticated form of community engagement that went well beyond "service learning," we would never have been able to implement our long-range strategy.

In the months leading up to our spring course, we began reaching out to potential community partners. One of these partners, Henderson Middle School, had a well-established relationship with the university as part of "Build It," a neighborhood-based civic-engagement program. Many University of Richmond students volunteer at Henderson as tutors, mentors, and classroom aides—and because Henderson is an almost entirely African American public school in Richmond, where most of the students receive free lunch and breakfast, it seemed like a generative place for our students to perform their play and discuss it with Henderson students.

We also decided to reach out to the racial reconciliation group Hope in the Cities. Founded in 1990, its goal is to "build trust through honest conversations on race, reconciliation and responsibility" and "to respond to the need for racial healing in Richmond, Virginia" (Hope in the Cities). After witnessing first hand how this group dealt with racial tensions at the majority-black public school Laura Browder's children attended, it seemed like a perfect fit with this project. She contacted Don Cowles, who facilitated the conversation at her children's school. He set up an initial meeting with himself and two other staff members—Sylvester "Tee" Turner, Director of Reconciliation Programs, who is black, and Cricket White, National Training and Facilitation Director, who is white.

We were not prepared for our own discomfort. In our first meeting Tee Turner immediately challenged us on our motivations and qualifications for teaching the course and fired out a series of questions: How would the community benefit from this project? If we were planning to use the community for research purposes, what would we offer back in return? Turner and White made it clear that Hope in the Cities wanted a commitment to a long-term partnership—that they did not want to be used as a kind of quick fix to addressing racial tensions. They also wanted us to acknowledge our privilege as educators coming from a heavily endowed institution. The initial discomfort we experienced ultimately proved productive: we realized that we needed to be sensitive in our approach to potential partners, and to avoid at all costs the appearance of being envoys from the wealthy university in the suburbs. And we also recognized that Turner and White were also testing our ability to tolerate uncomfortable moments and answer pointed questions.

That first meeting with *Hope in the Cities* made us uncomfortably aware that community partners might not always welcome us with open arms. While during that first fall, we often felt that we were knocking on doors and trying our best to ingratiate ourselves with potential partners, by the next summer, we began to see the benefits of our commitment to working on the project for five years. Following our first production, "Schooled: Racism, Resistance, and Education," we organized a discussion panel to provide context for the play. The panel, moderated by Tee Turner of *Hope in the Cities*, included Carmen Foster (one of a group of black students who desegregated formerly white Thomas Jefferson High School); Mark Person and Elizabeth Salim (white students who had attended Wythe High School during the first years of busing); and white school board member Lewis Booker, who spearheaded the busing initiative in Richmond—and who talked about how his family got death threats after he moved to implement the desegregation of Richmond schools. While the panelists provided a valuable framework for that year's audience to understand the issues of segregation and desegregation, several of these panelists also shaped the following year's production.

Carmen Foster was instrumental in facilitating a new partnership between *One Voice* and us, an interracial community chorus in Richmond—that helped students bridge the gap between their own experiences of race and those from an earlier generation. She told Adele Johnson, the president of the group, about our project, and Johnson contacted us. After meeting her, we decided to invite *One Voice* to be part of our production for the second year: our students attended a *One Voice* rehearsal, and choral director Glen McCune talked with the class about starting a racially diverse choir in 2001, in a city where many were reluctant to discuss racial issues. Finally, *One Voice* became an integral part of the second year's production: twenty chorus members appeared on stage with our class to provide musical accompaniment for the show. Our students were taken aback to hear Johnson talk about how novel it was for her to have a white friend from the chorus come over to share a play date with their grandchildren—the students were shocked that this should seem remarkable to her. However, by the end of the semester these same students were also talking openly about how segregated their own lives at the University of Richmond were—including their sports, student activities, and church groups.

While the partnership with *One Voice* took a form that was recognizable to us: an established group working with our structured project—the passion and interest of an individual who was unaffiliated with any formal group had a profound influence on our second year's project. Mark Person spoke eloquently during our panel and reiterated how life-changing his high school experience had been for him, and suggested to us that we focus on Wythe. Inspired by the panel discussion, he single-handedly rallied a group that had last been together thirty-five years previously, and reconnected them around the following year's production.

We first contacted Person after reading his words in the text we used for our first year's class, *The Color of Their Skin*. On Facebook, Person activated a huge network of alumni from the sixties, seventies, and even eighties. As a result we conducted two group interviews with black and white Wythe alums, many of whom had not seen one another since high school graduation. And when we had our second year's performance, the audience was packed with these same alums.

The final new partnership grew, not out of our first performance, but out of our desire to better understand the archives out of which our students developed the script—not as collections of documents and other objects, but as dynamic entities that reshape the ways we understand history. Rather than being passive spectators, we wanted our students and ourselves to become active agents in archive making. This, for us, became an important part of what Tee Turner had talked about: sharing in an equal partnership with the community rather than just taking what we needed for our short-term use.

In the first year, we simply visited the archives. We went on a field trip to the Library of Virginia to look at letters to the editor of the white Richmond newspaper, as well as to listen to Virginia Senator Harry Byrd's political speeches on the issue of "massive resistance." We visited the "African American Life in Richmond" collection at the Virginia Commonwealth University's Cabell Library, where archivist Ray Bonis showed us letters, scrapbooks, old issues of the African American newspaper the *Richmond Free Press*, and other ephemera from the time. These field trips were as much of a learning experience as the research. The trips were revealing for students who often remarked on how different VCU, a large public urban university, and the Library of Virginia, in downtown Richmond were from the elite space of the University of Richmond. However, in the archives themselves, our students were still unsure of what was important or what they were looking for. The contents of the archives seemed academic to them, disconnected from people's lived realities.

This experience made it clear to us that we needed to shift how we approached the archive from a mere repository of information to a site that encompassed human experiences, feelings, and memories. This ultimately led us to create more meaningful relationships with archivists and the institutions that housed the archives. As a result, in our second year we decided that it would be important for students to help build a digital archive as part of the course that would not only document their findings, but would also create a new community of those interested in the history of civil rights and education in Richmond—a group that might include, but not be limited to, activists, academics, and Richmond residents who had experienced this history themselves. We wanted this archive to include shared resources from different community archives, and also to showcase the voices and stories of those whom we had interviewed for the class. The creation of this archive has become a central part of our project and a crucial means of prompting students to think about history and its formation in a more complicated way.

The shift from visiting physical archives to building a digital collection forced us to recognize, not just our own students' limited understanding of archives, but our own (this despite our many years immersion in archives while doing our own academic research). How could we animate history, creating an archive that could actively contribute to the community? Salvador Barajas, who has a background in digital humanities and oral history projects, joined us to create this digital archive. He helped us reach out to the Valentine History Center, which has an unparalleled collection of photographs of Richmond history.

In the second year of the course, we intentionally changed the role of the students from researchers gathering and analyzing materials to archivists actively constructing narratives that helped contextualize their play in a cultural context. Every student assignment was focused on creating the play or building the archive. For instance, in the first assignment students provided archival annotations for at least two items from the Valentine Richmond History Center and two items from VCU's Special Collections. During our visit to the Valentine Richmond History Center, students looked at photos under the guidance of archivist Meghan Glass Hughes. We encouraged them to think about which images would help visitors to our digital archive gain a greater understanding of the context in which school integration occurred. They looked through a wide array of images, including photographs of a Ku Klux Klan rally held in Richmond in the late 1960s, images of Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking in Richmond—and images of trashed city streets in the aftermath of the riots following King's assassination. One of the photos they found showed a hand-lettered sign that read, "Mama is fussing, Daddy is cussing, all about bussing." That became an iconic image for our play as it expressed the parents' view of busing. When it came time to write their scenes for the play, many of our students returned to these archives for sources.

In the second assignment they created digital stories—short documentaries which blended narration, photographs and music—based on an interviewee's experience attending George Wythe High School. The digital stories that focused on an experience that was particularly meaningful to the interviewee and showed how that experience revealed another layer of the history of education in Richmond. These archival images helped contextualize the words of their interviewees. Creating digital stories ultimately helped our students connect the historical images and documents they encountered in the archives to the lived experience of the people they interviewed.

To make our archive succeed, we needed to establish long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with other archives and archivists. The Valentine History Center generously shared photographs with us and gave us permission to upload them into our digital archive. In return, our students wrote contextualizing captions for the images, thus making them more readily accessible and understandable to a wider audience. Some of these relationships were unexpected but beneficial: an intern from Ben-

nington College, Connor Dolson, who was working on the history of civil rights and education in Virginia, approached us. He worked with us for two hundred hours, creating a series of instructional videos to facilitate use of our archive in high school and university classrooms.

There were institutional obstacles to solidifying our relationship with VCU—despite the fact that Barajas was completing a doctoral program there and that Browder had taught there for sixteen years prior to coming to University of Richmond. The contrast between UR and VCU could not have been more stark: while UR was a well endowed, small liberal arts college in the suburbs of Richmond, VCU was a huge, underfunded state university in the heart of the city. While VCU's special collections were impressive in many areas, the library was understaffed as a result of state budget cuts, so many materials there were not yet catalogued, let alone digitized. Moreover, layers of bureaucracy at VCU had prevented effective collaboration from taking place. It was not until the second year, when VCU hired a new head of special collections, Wesley Chenault, whose specialty was civil rights history—and who as part of the collective John Q created performances based on archival sources—that we were able to forge an effective partnership (“John Q”).⁴ Working closely with Chenault, Yuki Hibben, the Assistant Head, Special Collections and Archives, and Ray Bonis, Archives Coordinator, who had introduced our students to the archive the previous year, we brought our class to VCU and they then considered what kinds of materials they could include in the digital archive we were building for the class. Chenault and Hibben were interested in the theory of archives and archive-building, and committed to making the archives more accessible, and to including the oral history interviews that would come out of our class. One of the most exciting products of our course emerged from this collaboration, a George Wythe High School collection, housed at VCU's Special Collections, including the yearbooks, newspapers, letter jackets, and other memorabilia that Barajas had been unable to find in any of the Richmond archives, including those at the high school itself. It was our hope that this collection would coalesce a community of alumni around their shared memories of busing—as well as provide a valuable resource.

Revising History by Erasing Race

One theme of our course, the erasure of history, became manifest for us the first day of class. We were discussing plans for the semester, and outlining ways that segregation, integration, and resegregation were a legacy of slavery, and how these policies had affected the education of Virginia students.

The first year, we were concerned that in a course specifically dealing with issues of race, our group consisted of one African American and eight white students.⁵ We did not want the only black student to be perceived by the others as the representative of her race. We were also concerned that the white students would have a hard time fully engaging with the

⁴ John Q, web 5 June 2012, <http://johnq.org/>.

⁵ We were also concerned that there were no theater majors in the class—most students were American Studies majors with a great deal of anxiety about performing the play that they would write.

subject of race. No one in the class wanted to address race: white students seemed to feel that even mentioning race would be offensive to the one black student—or perhaps to their professors. While most white students were resistant to engaging in substantive discussions of race, one white student expressed hostility through a series of offensive acts: coming late to class, checking Facebook in class, rejecting the responsibility of writing scenes for the play, declining to show up for extra rehearsals that his peers had scheduled, and worst of all, behaving dismissively toward our black interviewees. He refused to learn his lines for the play, thus compelling his classmates to cover for him on stage. This was not the historical erasure that was practiced by institutions failing to preserve their own records, but rather one young individual's refusal to remember the white supremacist past. By choosing to sleep while an older African American man was describing the emotionally painful experience of integrating an all-white school, he individually enacted the institutional process of erasure.

This student was an exception. The other students in the class were eager to engage with what they understood to be the historical realities of segregation—they just did not want to talk about how race functioned in their own lives. Our students' discomfort with this issue came up when Tee Turner and Cricket White from *Hope in the Cities* visited our class to discuss the issue of comparative privilege and how that might affect the outcome of an interview. In preparation for their workshop, the class had brainstormed potential interview questions. During the workshop, the students learned that their interviewees might not understand their questions the ways they had intended. Even the language that they used in constructing their questions could reveal their unconscious assumptions about race and class. To this end, we worked on rephrasing questions. Yet when Turner and White wanted to demonstrate the power of social categories in an exercise they called "superior, inferior," in which students compared themselves to one another, and had to determine whether they felt inferior or superior to each peer—and why—the answers tended to be along the lines of "he's a sophomore, and I am a senior." Finally Turner and White asked them if they perceived any differences between their two instructors (our skin colors are noticeably different). None of the students wanted to say anything.

A week later, the students saw this difference, which they had not wanted to name, brought into stark relief during our first interview, which took place in an upscale retirement home near the university with the elderly white cousin of one of our students, as well as two of the cousin's elderly friends, a married couple. As we all sat in the plush living room, the husband dominated the conversation about school desegregation in the sixties and seventies, and talked about why he and his wife had chosen to send their children to private school rather than the formerly white public schools that had recently been opened up to black students, and how these concerns about schools had been shared by many of their neighbors. As the husband was making conversation with us following the interview, it became clear

that he did not realize that Patricia Herrera was not a student, but rather one of the instructors. He then assumed that she was Mexican and began reminiscing about driving into a Mexican neighborhood in Los Angeles, which he took to be dangerous, with a Mexican American war buddy of his. When he realized that Herrera was one of the instructors, he recalled that his friend had "done good for himself," as he married a wealthy white woman. He compared that with Herrera's success as a university educator. "You are a doctor, huh?" he asked. "Well, congratulations."

We were both curious about how—or if—our students had noticed this moment, so we asked them about it. Several students were struck by the way that history that seemed impossibly remote to them was in fact much closer than they had realized: all three of our elderly white interviewees had known former slaves when they were children. One student noted how open-minded the couple had seemed—after all, the husband had been assuring us that he did not have an issue with people of color. But several students who had heard the comment he made to Herrera noted that while he may have expressed a willingness to go beyond race, in practice that willingness did not go far. Later, one student wrote in her reflections, "I was surprised to hear that [the man] made a comment to Dr. Herrera about being "fearful of Mexicans." Given this context, other students wondered about the racial composition of the neighborhood meetings that the couple had attended in response to school busing. While the students themselves may have been reluctant to acknowledge the difference in their instructors' skin colors, it was clear to them after this interaction that skin color had been the elephant in the room during that first interview—that, in fact, race did matter.

Politeness also mattered, but in ways that the students needed to analyze carefully in order to deploy good manners strategically. Their own politeness had gotten in the way of them being able to acknowledge the differences in their instructors' racial identities. And while their first interviewees had been hospitable, our students felt that they had used politeness as a way of glossing over uncomfortable racial tensions. Several students felt that they had not had control of the interview and had lacked the ability to ask their questions in a way that elicited revealing answers. What they saw as the failures of the first interview led students to reconsider how they conducted future interviews. While politeness could be a way to silence uncomfortable debate, maybe they could use manners to show respect to interviewees and effectively initiate difficult conversations.

They spent almost all of one class discussing how they could choreograph the next interaction more effectively so that they were not solely passive listeners, but were actively and consciously shaping each interaction. In his own space, it had been easier for the first interviewee to dominate the conversation while his wife passed around endless bowls of snacks to our students, who were all perched on low stools. Reflecting on this, our students thought carefully about the ways that the setting of the interview helped shape the content and the interactions between the

interviewers and the interviewees, and agreed that we should conduct future interviews in a cozy living room setting at the university. They decided that each class member should have a distinct role to play in the process, and divided up these roles among themselves, so that as an interviewee arrived, it was predetermined who would be responsible for greeting that person, who would offer refreshments, who would ask each question, who would be responsible for going over the release form, and who would operate the recording equipment. Their desire to conduct better interviews was reflective of their shift from passive students to active shapers of the process. This was evident most of all in the work of one white student, who began seeking out interviewees on her own and even conducted individual interviews outside of class time.

The rest of the interviews we conducted that semester proved instrumental in illuminating the limitations of the students' understanding of integration. During our interview with Tee Turner and Charles Alexander, who was one of the Charlottesville Twelve—the first cohort to integrate the public schools in Charlottesville—our students had another eye-opening moment that they brought up later in class. One of them asked Turner a question about his fight for integration and he quickly corrected the student: "We were never fighting for integration," he said, "we wanted equal access to quality education." Our students' unspoken and perhaps unconscious assumption had been that the goal of African Americans in the civil rights struggle was the opportunity to mingle socially with whites. Turner's comment not only made them aware of their unconscious assumption, but also shifted their understanding of civil rights history. Moments like this, when students were able to bring their academic knowledge into dialogue with the lived experience of their interviewees, led them to think more deeply about the process of making meaning from documents, academic monographs, and testimonies, as well as the ways in which history leaves its imprint on individual lives.

The next step for our students was to see how they could take these stories and present them in a way that made their power manifest to their audience. Thanks to our enterprising student, who had first contacted her, we also interviewed Elizabeth Salim, who had been among the first white students to attend George Wythe high school when busing began. She talked about the breakthrough that occurred when a farsighted coach integrated the formerly all-black cheerleading squad, when black and white students had to work together in order to make their team succeed—and keep up the reputation of their high school. While many students remembered teachers who were hostile to integration, they were adamant that sports was where integration was most successfully practiced and where students often felt as though they could, and did, work things out on their own. Thus Salim's story ended up becoming a pivotal scene in both the first and second years' plays.

Our students may have connected to Salim's story in particular because they themselves were so recently out of high school, but they did

not necessarily understand the depth of conflict that she had been describing. They would learn much more about this from a group of students at Henderson Middle School, a public school in Richmond where they premiered this scene and led a question and answer period. Our students were first taken aback when they walked through the school—the noise level was almost overwhelming because there were no walls between the classrooms, only partitions. And when the middle-school students filed into the auditorium, our students got their second shock: every single one of them was African American. (Of 700 students at Henderson, 694 are black, and 6 are white.) Our students may have intellectually understood that resegregation had followed the desegregation of the Richmond schools, but their visit to Henderson made this concrete for them.

While our students had expected to be the teachers of the Henderson students, they also found their understanding shaped by what the middle school students told them. After the performance, our students led a discussion and raised several important questions that prompted the children to think about their learning conditions, the resources made available to them, and how their school might or might not differ from other schools. They asked the Henderson students about segregation: all of the students who raised their hands explained that it was something bad and something in the past. Then one of our students asked if any of them had ever attended another school and what the difference had been. “It was nice,” one of them said of her integrated school in the suburbs. “They had nicer stuff.”

“Like what?” our student asked.

“Walls in the classrooms.” While some of the Henderson students said that it did not matter, we could see the looks of dismay on the faces of the teachers standing behind them. While the students may have seen their learning conditions as normal, the teachers understood just how great the obstacles to teaching and learning were there. Moreover, there were several students in the audience who had attended other schools and knew that Henderson Middle School differed in many respects. And our students clearly understood how difficult both teaching and learning would be under the conditions posed by Henderson, where students are not only racially but also economically segregated: 96 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches, a clear indicator of poverty.

While our students had played the cheerleading scene as a triumph of racial harmony over segregation, the Henderson students saw something different: they wanted our students to highlight the violence implicit in the scene. The racial violence that so many of our interviewees mentioned only to gloss over—in effect downplaying the traumatic tensions from the historical record—was very much a part of the Henderson students’ lived realities. This became evident when one of the university students asked if any of the middle school students had ever attended school with students of another race—and what those experiences had been. “Yeah,” said a boy. “This kid at the water fountain

called me the N-word." Our student asked what had happened next. "I punched him in the face." None of our students knew how to respond to this. They acknowledged his answer and gently moved on to the next portion of the program. In retrospect, our students wanted to know more, but did not know how to proceed as they came face-to-face with racism and segregation in Richmond's school system. The racial violence that erupted during integration was the experience that was most painful for our interviewees, both white and black, and the thing that they had the hardest time talking about. But the Henderson students were very clear about what the cheerleading scene needed: more anger. That anger was very close to the surface for them, and very easy to access. And when our students invited the Henderson students to play out the scene, the emotional intensity of the cheerleaders' confrontations with one another crystallized.

Our culminating performance the first year took place at the University of Richmond Downtown in front of a standing-room-only audience, comprising people from both the university and the greater Richmond community. The play our students had written offered up the most well-known events of desegregation: a narrator guided the audience through a historical pageant as our students enacted such moments as Senator Harry Byrd's pivotal speech on massive resistance, black and white protest rallies, and the graduation ceremony that took place just a few years ago to recognize the loss suffered by black and poor white students who missed out on five years of education when many Virginia schools closed their doors.

The audience was enthusiastic about our students' performance, but the most memorable aspects of the evening came when our panelists shared their own experiences, ones that had been represented on stage. Lewis Booker talked about the day he and the other members of the Richmond school board got the order to start busing immediately: while the details of the death threats he and his family received were dramatic, even more striking to our students was his continued enthusiasm about the Richmond public schools, from which all of his own children had graduated. And when Elizabeth Salim said, "That cheerleading scene, that was me," the audience connected the events of the play to lived experiences and living individuals. Watching Elizabeth watch her own past being played out on stage, we glimpsed the ways that the embodiment of history allowed for the confrontation of past and present, and sensed the power that it held for performers, observers, and participants in those past events. This moment, where past and present, performance and reality come together, is, we decided, what we needed to focus on for our second year's performance. The intervention of panelist Mark Person and the community of Wythe alums—white and black, skeptical and nostalgic, reflective and celebratory—that he rallied to the cause of our project would show us the complexities involved in this endeavor.

The Discomforts of Historical Intimacy

We began the next year's class feeling reassured that with Mark Person's help, we could develop deeper relationships with a diverse group of individuals who had all gone through a watershed moment in civil rights history. We suspected, as well, that this year's group of students might have an easier time connecting to the Wythe alums. Our class of eight was half white and half black. Half of them were from Virginia, including one student who was home-schooled in Richmond and one who went to public school in the Richmond suburbs. Several of the students were interested in educational policy and were volunteering at Henderson Middle School. And fortunately for us, there were a number of theater majors in the class. We did not anticipate, however, the anxieties that our students would feel when faced with representing the Wythe alums on stage—a group with whom they had developed a strong relationship.

The Wythe alums were eager not only to reconnect with one another but also to rehabilitate the image of Wythe as a school that is nowadays seen as troubled. When Wythe was chosen as a site for the national Violence-Free Zone initiative in 2008

the selection was based, among other things, on the school's 2006–07 truancy rate—as measured by the percentage of students with six or more unexcused absences—of 66 percent, which was more than triple the 20 percent average for the other seven Richmond high schools. In addition, George Wythe was tied for the most youth aged 14–19 years who were arrested between January and June of 2008, comprising 36 percent of all youth arrests among Richmond high schools during that time period.⁶

Mark Person and several other alums served as mentors to current Wythe students, raising money for the school, and otherwise trying to make a difference. In light of the school's current reputation, they were anxious that we present a nuanced—and fairly positive—portrait of the school that they had all known. The more they interacted with the Wythe alums, the more our students realized how high the stakes were in their representation of events in the early seventies.

The Wythe alums concerns about our students' representation of their experience—and their own continued discomfort with some of the events of the busing era—came through on the first group interview we conducted with Mark Person, Elizabeth Salim, and three other alums—all white except for Royal Robinson. We learned some startling things during that first interview: for instance, we had not known that the city did not provide school buses that first year, and that students had to travel as far as two hours each way on city buses. But for the most part, the interviewees waxed nostalgic: Janice Rossi Hassell reconstructed the moves she had learned years ago during her time on the cheerleading squad while the others applauded, and led the group in singing the Wythe song. Many alums recalled the most successful interactions occurring around sports,

⁶ Baylor University Study Finds Violence-Reduction Program Improves Safety and Attendance and Decreases Need for Police in Richmond, Va., High School," Baylor University, 5 June 2012, <<http://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=73859>>. For more information on the Violence-Free Zone initiative, go to www.cneonline.org/pages/Violence-Free_Zone.

whether it was white cheerleaders decorating the rooms of black football players, or black players protecting their lone white teammates from racially motivated violence from opposing teams. These moments became key in our script, which focused on a white cheerleader and black football player developing a somewhat ambiguous relationship. Yet underneath the nostalgia we glimpsed moments of real pain, too, as when Royal cried in recounting the time that his only white teammate was brutally attacked by another high school team during an “away” basketball game.

We had found that the previous year’s interview structure—meeting in the cozy living room, plying our interviewees with snacks—had worked very well, so we continued in this vein, but this time, since we were intent on creating a Wythe archive, we also invited our interviewees to bring their old yearbooks and other memorabilia. Thus, when we started the second Wythe interview it felt almost like a party, one which included over fifteen alums, a group almost evenly split between black and white, most of whom had not seen one another in years or even decades—and some of whom had driven in from Pennsylvania and DC to participate that day. This group, among them the participants from the previous week’s interview, gathered to munch cookies, exclaim over forgotten letter jackets, and look through scrapbooks—eager to share their recollections of the Wythe years with us, and with one another. Mark Person, who turned out to be an enterprising partner, had called a reporter at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, who had contacted the two of us, and then surprised us by running an announcement of that day’s interview in the morning paper, with our email addresses and the address of the room where the interviews would be taking place. What we had envisioned as a small, focused project was taking on a life of its own.

We were anxious to dig beneath the nostalgia that seemed to smooth out the rough surfaces of the alums’ experience. We realized that we needed to ask them to focus on the challenging moments as much as the fond memories—and because the group was boisterous, it ended up that one of us, rather than the students, steered the interview (although the students did ask a few questions throughout the afternoon). We felt a little concerned that we were taking away the students’ roles, but we also thought it was important for them to observe us facilitating the conversation. Although they may not always have asked pointed questions, they were certainly active listeners, as they had to decide whom to interview, and what their follow-up questions would be based on this initial interview. The students’ role would come afterwards, when they scheduled follow-up interviews with all the participants and used those interviews as the basis for digital stories they created about each person. We had prepped the students to listen for difficult moments and hesitations in the conversation.

One of these challenging moments surfaced fairly quickly, when we asked about how the alums remembered busing: a few white alums immediately chimed in that it was a failure, and Royal Robinson countered that, although sometimes difficult, he counted busing as one of the best

experiences of his life, because it gave him a great education and opened the doors for other opportunities. (He had gone straight from high school to a job at the Federal Reserve, from which he had just retired.) Ultimately many of the alums agreed that integration seemed to work best when the kids had worked things out on their own, and that the intervention of adults had often been problematic. Another black alum, Elwood York, a lawyer who had done a stint as the attorney general of the Virgin Islands, recalled an incident in which his physics teacher had asked him to take a note to the principal's office. The principal had shown him the note, which suggested that York be transferred out of physics because it was "too challenging" for him. At that point, York had vowed that he would not only excel in physics but would never be seen taking his book home: he wanted his academic success to appear effortless.

Some memories were shared by all participants, such as the wounding effects of an incendiary black history day speech by a local lawyer for the Nation of Islam, Jeroyd Greene, Jr., who went on to a career in politics as Richmond City Council member Sa'ad al-Amin. Others were more individual, like the secret Black Panther Party meetings that private investigator Philip Brunson remembered attending during high school. An important element in the script our students developed was the fact that black students were almost less intimidated by their new white classmates than by other black students who would have been assigned to their rival black high schools, had integration not occurred: as Elwood York said,

for a black kid coming to Wythe, especially living in the Southside, we had our own social issues we had to deal with internally that were far more traumatic than dealing with the white racist thing. I mean, I've been black all my life, so calling me nigger—I don't care—I mean, what you gonna do? But dealing with my colleagues, who I grew up as a rival against, and now I'm stuck in school with them—y'all weren't the problem. I was happy to sit in class. (Wythe Alum Interviews 27)⁷

⁷ Interviews were conducted by students in the course with our guidance.

While white and black alums were careful not to offend one another—white alums in particular wanted to assure their black classmates that they were not racists and that they had black friends—there were also many direct moments, as when white alum June Wilbert turned to one of her black classmates and told her that "If anything, we were taught... respect, but if anything we were taught fear of you, if I can say that without offending you." (Wythe Alum Interviews 32) And there were hilarious moments too, as when June Wilbert referenced belonging to the KKK. When we asked about her KKK membership, the room exploded in laughter: it turned out to be the sorority Kappa Kappa Kappa—something which the black alums had to learn as well when they first encountered it in school.

The hardest moments for both white and black interviewees had to do with the violence that erupted at athletic games, on school buses, in bathrooms, and elsewhere within and outside the school itself. There

were several white alums present whose siblings had suffered severe beatings at the hands of their black classmates and who alluded to these beatings but were uncomfortable talking about them—and black students who talked about how traumatic the threat of violence was for them at school. Of course, Elwood York insisted that “we as men were actually intimidated by a lot of the women....The women were far more violent....you realize this was the women’s lib era. So we had multiple problems” (Wythe Alum Interviews 20).

Writing and Embodying History

Although their archival research was key in developing the script, the students naturally gravitated towards creating characters based on their interviews. Yet the very richness of the interviews, and the rawness of many of the stories the alums shared in the second interview became a major source of anxiety for the class when it came time to perform their script.⁸ They were not especially nervous because they had never written a script before (although many of them had started the semester expressing that particular anxiety). They did worry, though, about embodying the people they had interviewed, sometimes shared meals, exchanged emails, and otherwise established relationships with.

And when it came time for them to say their characters’ lines on stage, they really got nervous. The racial anxieties that were present during the interviews also hummed in the room throughout our class meeting. Even though they knew that they were playing historical characters on stage, the students’ feelings about their own racial position made it difficult for them to utter particular words: “honky” turned out to be a particular sticking point (after we explained what the term meant; no one in the class had heard it before). The very first day of class, a white student had come up to us extremely upset and unsure of whether she wanted to continue in the class. Her family was politically very conservative, and she had gone to Lee-Davis high school, a virtually all-white public school named after Confederate leaders—and had never thought before about the significance of that name. She seemed uncomfortable contemplating the personal issues the class might raise for her. In the end, she decided to stay and became an active participant. But it was this racially loaded history, in which she now saw her herself implicated, that made the work challenging for her.

When it came time to perform the play, a black student playing the black history day speaker had a hard time with “honky”—but an equally hard time raising her fist in a black power salute (Figure 1). She was an active evangelical Christian and had opened up one afternoon on a ride back from a field trip, where she and another black student talked about how segregated life on the UR campus was and how she sometimes felt that she was expected to hang out with other black students when the only thing she had in common with some of them was race.

The students performed the play this year at Henderson to a packed

⁸ We devoted four classes to the script development. In one of the class periods, we decided on the important scenes that we needed to share with our community. After establishing this, we ordered the sequence of events and then students choose the scenes they were going to write. We used google docs to compile all the scenes and revise the script collectively as needed. The additions, deletions, and other changes were transparent contributed to a sense of collectivity. Even though one student wrote the scene, the entire class felt responsible because they were telling the story together.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALVADOR BARAJAS

FIGURE 1. Chelea Jackson as Jeroyd Greene (downstage) and Charlene Morris (upstage) as a student in *Wythe: A Drama in Black & White...And So Much More* performed at Henderson Middle School on April 16, 2012.

house, with an audience that ranged from ten year-olds to octogenarians and that included many Wythe alums, as well as students and faculty from Henderson, VCU, University of Richmond, and other area schools. Mark Person created a special exhibit of school memorabilia for the Wythe alums in the lobby. Twenty members of One Voice chorus provided a musical counterpoint which created seamless transitions between scenes—the punctuation of the typewriter as enraged citizens wrote letters to the school board about the implementation of busing; the sound of gossiping high school students as an interracial couple walked down the hallway together, the sound of an angry crowd as a near-riot broke out in the wake of the Jeroyd Greene speech—and finally, a swelling gospel hymn. (Figure 2) This year, the students had focused on characters and relationships—not just providing a historical overview, but delving into the ways that historical events changed individuals, families, and institutions. The title of this year’s play, “Wythe: A Drama in Black and White...and So Much More” underscored the complexity of both the history that they were plumbing and the experiences that formed the basis of their play.

VCU special collections head Wesley Chenault moderated the post-performance discussion, which included panelists Elwood York and Mark Person, Valentine Richmond History Center director of collections and interpretation Meghan Glass Hughes, digital archivist Salvador Barajas, our student Cheleah Jackson, and Henderson Middle School student Vazy Herman, who had been working with our previous year’s class par-

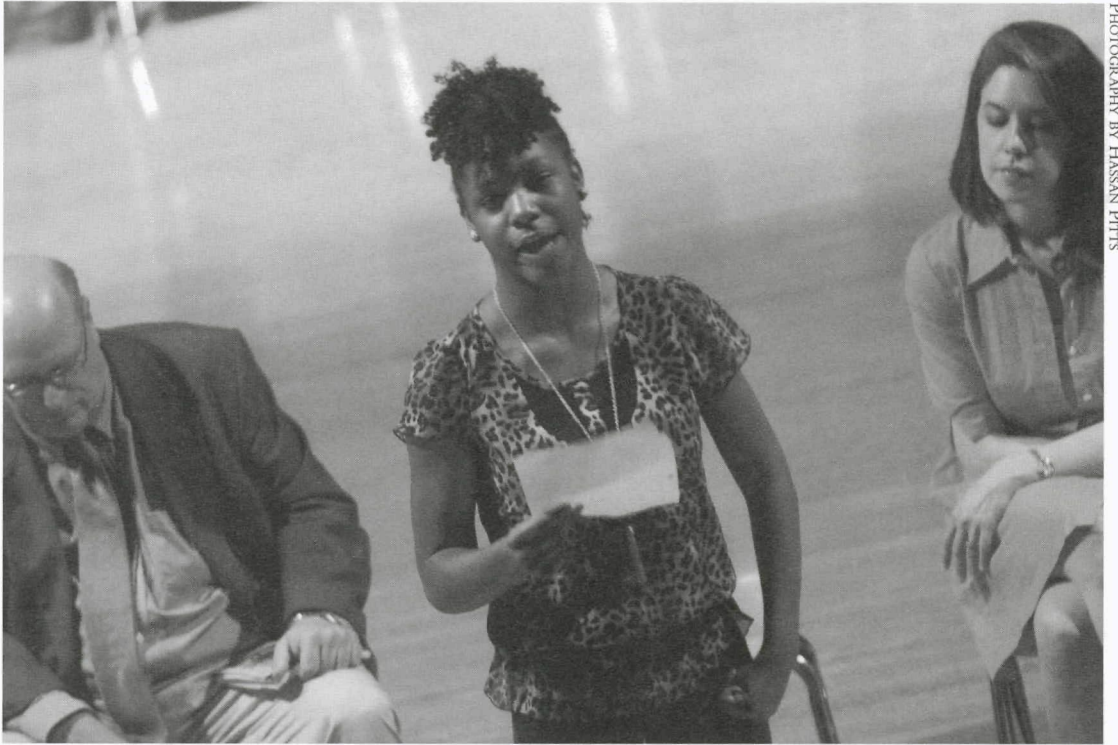


PHOTOGRAPHY BY HASSAN PITTS

FIGURE 2. Kelsey Mickelson, Charlene Morris, and Danielle Stokes as school board members responding to letters from concerned parents in *Wythe: A Drama in Black & White...And So Much More* performed at Henderson Middle School on April 16, 2012.

ticipant Katherine Schmidt on a project to create poetry and digital stories about her and her classmates' experience of segregation today. (Figure 3) The dialogue between panelists and audience members was especially spirited, since so many in the audience were seeing their own experiences performed on stage. Perhaps the most powerful moment of the discussion came when former cheerleader Janice Rossi Hassell exclaimed that she had read *The Color of Their Skin*, at Mark Person's suggestion, and that she had been shocked to learn that her high school experiences were a complex chapter in Richmond's history of civil rights and education. As they told us afterwards, in this moment, our students recognized the impact of their performance on those people whose experiences they had represented, and who now were able to see themselves not just as individuals, but also as historical agents.

After the performance, audience members lingered to leaf through the yearbooks and graduation programs and to ask us about the Wythe archive we were developing, and to which many of them were donating their memorabilia. We talked about this with Chenault and Hibben when we met with them a month later to move what we called the Wythe museum from our offices into archival storage in VCU Special Collections. As we sorted through the materials to decide what VCU would accept (no to the Curtis Mayfield 8-track tapes, yes to the autograph puppy), we found ourselves connecting the objects with the memories of the people who had donated them, and the stories they had shared with us.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY HASSAN PITTS

FIGURE 3. Vazja Herman, student from Henderson Middle School, performs her poem at the post-performance panel discussion, 16 April 2012.

We were now boxing up the history that Barajas had been unable to locate during his long and fruitless search through the public schools and libraries of Richmond before the semester had began. We were creating a new archive where those who had experienced this history, and those who wanted to learn it, could come to pore through those yearbooks, and see how black faces and white faces appeared, disappeared, and sometimes reappeared in them throughout the years. We were assembling a visual record of a painful history that had been largely buried in Richmond, a history that seemed at times to flicker in and out of the city's collective memory. And, we hoped, we could play a small part in coalescing a long-scattered community in thinking about this history together.

We are grateful for the willingness of many Wythe alums to share their stories, especially Mark Person. Special thanks to the various community partners involved in this project including Hope in the Cities, especially Tee Turner and Cricket White; One Voice, especially Adele Johnson and Glen McCune; The Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond, especially John Moeser, Terry Dolson, and Cassie Price; Kim Dean at UR Downtown; the Department of Theatre and Dance, especially Debbie Mullin and the Program of American Studies; Henderson Middle School, especially Rosemarie Wiegandt;

Katherine Schmidt for guiding students from Henderson Middle School with their digital stories; Salvador Barajas and Connor Dolson for all of their great work on the digital archive; VCU Cabell Library's Special Collections, especially Ray Bonis, Wesley Chenault, and Yuki Hibben; Meghan Glass Hughes at the Valentine Richmond History Center. Thanks to all of our interviewees: Keith T. Andes, Sandra M. Antoine, Philip H. Brunson III, Fredrick D. German, Janice M. Hassell, Ray P. Kyle, James W. La Prade, Robin Denise Mines, Val Perkins, Mark Person, Thomas David Riddell, Royal L. Robinson, Elizabeth B. Salim, Randolph "Randy" Shelton, Claire Spicer, Laura S. Martin Summers, Gary W. Thompson, Anneliese Warriner (Ware), June (Dobb) Wilbert, Maurice Williams, Silas "Elwood" York. And finally to the students, including: Max Baird, Christina Brodt, Camden Cantwell, Kathryn Cohen, Renee Horen, Cheleah Jackson, Jessica Kelley, Amanda Lineberry, Jenna McAuliffe, Kelsey Mickelson, Charlene Morris, Amani Morrison, Michael Rogers, Katherine Schmidt, Danielle Stokes, and Cheyenne Varner.

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