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Author(s): Charles Bright

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still read the *Sydney Morning Herald* online almost every day. “I just can’t seem to leave Sydney,” she said, perhaps not realizing that she had never actually left Plattsburgh.

Teaching this course also had a profound impact on me. The relationship I established with these students was the strongest in my teaching experience. It broadened my ideas on how students can best capitalize on the multitude of primary and secondary sources available to them, forcing me to innovate on the more traditional pedagogical methods of lectures, note taking, and discussions. It also demonstrated that Plattsburgh’s Honors Program allows for unusual flexibility and creativity, engendering a student community strong enough to survive for several weeks without a professor. The next step, then, is to stretch such opportunities to students in the general curriculum, perhaps through the learning communities that have been successful on so many campuses. While doing so would necessitate administrative support and the shattering of rigid registrar schedules, I hope in the future to introduce other courses “outside the box” to a variety of students on a variety of levels, as the rewards are many.

“It Was As If We Were Never There”: Recovering Detroit’s Past for History and Theater

Charles Bright

This project began in a conversation about Sophocles’ tragedy *Philoctetes* and the ancient Greek practice of combining the telling of history with the rituals of theater. It was designed to address two problems I had encountered in teaching a course on the history of Detroit.

First, although the city celebrated its three hundredth anniversary this year with the Detroit 300 festival, it is in most respects a twentieth-century boomtown. Much of its early history has been erased by the power and speed of its dynamic expansion in the first half of the century—and its equally dramatic contraction in the second half. The dominant historical discourse is one of rise and fall, spiked by an immense nostalgia for the city that once (briefly) was.¹ The recent past is often deployed as a cautionary tale about what goes wrong with urban spaces when racism, white flight, and industrial evacuation undercut a city’s viability.² Such a historical construction

Charles Bright is a professor of history, teaching in the University of Michigan’s Residential College where he also serves, this year, as its director.

Readers may contact Bright at <cbright@umich.edu>.

¹ See, for example, Ze’ev Chafets, *Devil’s Night and Other True Tales of Detroit* (New York, 1990); and Jerry Herron, *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* (Detroit, 1993).

² The best is Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996).

places Detroit in a past that is now lost and irretrievable and leaves current residents, especially the African American descendants of those who came to the city during the Great Migration, dangling at the end of history with little hope and no agency. There is a strange disconnect between the history of the city and the people who live in it.

Second, although Detroit is only forty minutes' drive from the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan (UM), a wide chasm separates the average undergraduate from the people of the city. This is not only a racial and class divide, but a gap of purposes in which the large research university tends to treat Detroit as a resource or laboratory, extracting data in the production of knowledge while returning little to the city. Recently, spurred on by the commitment of Provost Nancy Cantor to make the university a "public good," the graduate and professional schools have tried to overcome this legacy and the distrust that goes with it.³ But little of the new orientation has reached undergraduates. Indeed, my own rather traditional way of teaching Detroit history seemed to reinforce distance: my students did history projects in the city, interviewing residents, poking around archives, looking *into* and *at* the city like spectators, and producing essays, term projects, and research papers that I read, graded, and filed away, lifting here and there a fact or a citation for my own use. But I was open to new possibilities when, in a conversation with my colleague at the Residential College Kate Mendeloff (who had extensive background in community-based theater), the idea arose to use oral histories as the basis for creating stage pieces. We then received strong institutional and funding support from Professor David Scobey, whose Arts of Citizenship program is mandated to build cultural links between the academy and the community.

As initially conceived, the project had three aims: first, to develop a course that took undergraduates out of the classroom to engage residents of the city directly through the collection of life histories; second, to combine interview work with theater improvisations that could be re-presented to our informants as performance pieces that they could react to; and third, to do this work in collaboration with Detroiters, using the resources and skills of the university in ways that would prove relevant to residents and would yield usable cultural products that could be left behind—"owned"—by our partners in the city.

How we did this depended on whom we found to work with. We had to figure out which of the possible partners had compatible objectives and fungible calendars. University participants came to the table concerned with contact hours, weeks in the semester, term projects and assignments, not to mention final products and gradable results. People in the community were on a very different clock, with aims that were both more immediate and longer-running than a university semester. Luckily, in our exploratory discussions, we struck up a relationship with Rick Sperling, artistic director of the Mosaic Youth Theater of Detroit, a remarkably talented troupe of some seventy-five high school students recruited by audition from all over the city. The group

³ Nancy Cantor, "Reinvention: Why Now? Why Us?," paper delivered at the symposium on the Boyer Commission Report, State University of New York, Stony Brook, April 2000, quoted in the "Report of the President's Commission on the Undergraduate Experience," University of Michigan, October, 2001 (in the possession of Charles Bright).

produced an original play every year. Sperling was looking for material that would contribute to the Detroit 300 celebration in 2001, and since his is a theater of young people, we thought we might build a play around interviews with Detroit residents about growing up in the city—across racial and ethnic groups, in different communities, and over several decades. For us, the scheme promised to place college students in multiple roles—as learners/researchers, collaborators, and mentors—while helping develop a product that would remain with, and be of use to, our Detroit partners.

In our initial plan, Mendeloff and I were to run a semester-long course in which high school and college students, working in teams, would conduct interviews with Detroiters of various ages about what it was like to grow up in the city. We would then take the material gathered to Mosaic rehearsals for improvisational work that would produce both scenes for the play and problems for my students to investigate further. Over the course of a semester, the students conducted some thirty interviews and did theater and playwriting exercises with the material. The work stretched our organizational capacities and proved very demanding of the students' time, especially that of our high school partners, making stable interview teams impossible to sustain. As the work proceeded, moreover, the Mosaic students became particularly fascinated by the interviews with African Americans who had grown up during the 1940s in Black Bottom, the neighborhood on the near east side where black migrants from the South had been effectively confined. It was on these stories that our work began to focus.

Hastings Street, the main commercial strip running north-south through Black Bottom, was once the center of east European Jewish settlement, but in the interwar years it became a bustling "mixed use" center of African American business, sociability, night life, and underworld activity. All the big bands, jazz artists, and blues singers of the day performed in its bars and juke joints; the street had one of the highest concentrations of black-owned businesses in the country; and the nearby flats and tenements formed a classic "ethnic community" with people of different class and degree living side by side in housing stock that was increasingly crowded and run-down.⁴ The war boom of the 1940s brought the twin trajectory of dynamism and decay to a climax, and in the 1950s, the city administration attacked what it called "urban blight" by bulldozing Black Bottom to lay Interstate 75 right down Hastings Street, obliterating even its memory.⁵ "It was," said one of our informants, "as if we were never there."

Or so it seemed. Not one of the youngsters in the Mosaic company—95 percent of them African American—had ever heard of Hastings Street. Their school libraries held nothing about it; their history texts were silent. We sent them to ask their grandparents, elderly relatives, and neighbors about Hastings Street, and they came back brimming with stories. Everyone over fifty had something to tell them, and it quickly became clear that we had tapped a gold mine of material rich in theatrical potential but also deeply meaningful to our Detroit partners. Given their growing excitement, we provided tape recorders, questions, and training in interview techniques, then

⁴ See Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945* (Bloomington, 1992).

⁵ See June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore, 1997).



Mosaic Theater actors tell stories about growing up dancing in the Detroit neighborhood of Black Bottom. *Photograph by david smith Photography. Courtesy Mosaic Theater.*

relied on the Mosaic kids to do the interviewing. From then on, the coming-of-age theme blended into a project of recovery, in which high school students discovered broad aspects of their city's past previously invisible to them, and their elders found in the curiosity of the kids reasons to remember and ways, through stories, of instructing and exhorting a younger generation. The stories captured the many deep contradictions of the historic black community: the pride of survival; the nostalgia for neighbors who watched and took care; a familiarity with card games, prostitution, and the numbers; and the lack of contact with a larger white world, coupled with a sustained recognition that this had been an enforced community, created by segregation. As this intergenerational dialogue took shape, the role of the UM participants changed: with the second semester, we brought graduate students into the project and turned over to UM undergraduates the responsibilities for researching, framing, and contextualizing the stories that our community partners discovered. Eventually they created a lobby exhibit of text and photographs to travel with the Mosaic play and provide the audience with a historical context.

The project took an especially important turn when one of our informants mentioned an after-school social group at Black Bottom's Miller High School called the Y-Gees (for Youth Guidance). One of our graduate researchers discovered that this was one of several programs the city created after the race riot of 1943 to keep high school kids occupied and off the streets, that it had been sponsored by the legendary Loving

brothers, one of them the first black academic teacher in the Detroit school system, and that it had sustained a small theater company and singing ensemble in the two short years it lasted. High schoolers asked their informants about the Y-Gees and, to our surprise, brought back reports from several who had been members of the club. We brought these original Y-Gees to a meeting with Mosaic. After small-group interviews, the whole company reconvened, and one by one, the students retold stories they had heard; the elders listened, elaborated, corrected, and added details, showing the youngsters a dance step or a cheerleading routine. Curiosity mixed with recollection to elicit a shared history, and Sperling began to see a story line and the shape of a play: a Y-Gees meeting in 1944 in which the members try to invent a play about their lives. The Mosaic kids would impersonate youngsters of another era and tell “their” stories, using what they had learned from their elders. There would be music, dance, and laughter, but also a war and a race riot to capture. What stories should they include? How would these be enacted? What did each capture or miss about “their” lives in Black Bottom? This would be the play—about a play—and the very process of exploration and creation that the students had been through in developing the dramatic material would become what in theater is called the through-line of the play.

The project was now in the possession of our community collaborators. UM faculty and students continued to help with the interviews, participate in the improvisations, follow up on questions of fact that arose, and offer comment and feedback, but the play belonged to Mosaic. Early in 2001, Sperling assembled the scenes in progress and wrote a script. From then on, the company was working from the text, altering, modifying, refining it, but also now framed by it. Several draft performances before an audience of informants gave elders further opportunity to talk back to the kids—correcting facts, recalling more details, debating the location of a store or the slang used for everyday things—and by their enthusiasm telling these young people that what they were doing was important for the whole community. “I never knew so many people cared so much about Detroit,” said one Mosaic student. “This has been the most important thing that ever happened to me,” announced an elder Y-Gee. With each session, the play got sharper and more accurate, but it also became a collaboration in which a whole community was involved in the business of shaping a history of itself. The university people were now witnesses on the sidelines. It was one of the happiest moments of my life as a teacher.

In the end, the collaboration with Mosaic and the imperatives of producing a play subordinated my history syllabus to the agendas of our Detroit partners. Yet what they wanted to do demanded historical material, and this took my students beneath the surface of events. It opened questions about social history and the work of memory in a context that gave their historical inquiries immediate relevance. My students learned history with a purpose; the processes of locating a site, tracing a name, and reviving a slang expression or a way of dressing were not esoteric problems for the classroom, but essential details to make the collaboration work. In the recovery of Hastings Street, our partners found a vehicle for achieving other, more immediate aims having to do with community building and intergenerational communication. The real imperatives of our joint project only became apparent in the doing of the



Actors impersonate the white mobs during the 1943 Detroit race riot. At the end of the scene, they all took off their masks and moved them, wavelike, as the young woman in the front told how a white mob swept down the street in a wave that nobody stopped. *Photograph by david smith Photography. Courtesy Mosaic Theater.*

work. Together, we discovered common ground in the history we were making. The past became a terrain of exchanges across racial, class, and generational lines.

When Mosaic premiered the play *2001 Hastings Street* to sell-out crowds at Detroit's Music Hall in May 2001, it was more than a good evening's entertainment. The audience "talked back" all through the performance—murmuring assent, remembering and reliving long-forgotten moments across the aisles and in the lobby, and in their applause affirming these young actors as the carriers of their memories and the heirs of their experience. For performers and audience alike, this history, enacted and public, helped to validate the present and to evoke a future. It served a public good. No classroom performance, however eloquent or compelling, could have taught undergraduate students of history so well this deeper lesson about why we study and teach history.⁶

⁶ The interview tapes are now in the possession of the Arts of Citizenship Program, University of Michigan (and will eventually make their way to the Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, University of Michigan). I have a copy of the script in my possession. Every time it is performed, there are changes, updates, and alterations of one kind or another; it is a work in continual process.

“Bringing History to Life”: Oral History, Community Research, and Multiple Levels of Learning

A. Glenn Crothers

In the past three decades, as college pedagogy has come to emphasize the benefits of cooperative classroom environments and experiential learning and as more historians study their subject from the bottom up, focusing their research on traditionally ignored or disempowered groups, history teaching has increasingly moved away from the top-down lecture format toward new methods of presenting history. The benefits of new methodologies are widely recognized. Cooperative classrooms and experiential learning enable students to engage more fully with historical materials, to enjoy multiple perspectives on historical evidence, and, it is hoped, to gain a better understanding of the past and the process of writing history. In contrast, a parallel innovation in college teaching—community-based research, or service learning—has few advocates in the field of history. Service or community-based learning engages students in meeting local needs in order to link the classroom and the community and thereby to create more civic-minded individuals and a more engaged academic scholarship.¹

A. Glenn Crothers is assistant professor of history at Indiana University Southeast. Readers may contact Crothers at <acrother@ius.edu>.

¹ Barbara Jacoby et al., *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices* (San Francisco, 1996). For the classic statement of the need for an academic scholarship that is engaged with the community, see Ernest L.