Teaching African American Material Culture with Digital Humanities: Final Report

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Executive Summary

The following is a final report for the Teaching African American Material Culture with Digital Humanities Project—a project that was generously supported by a grant from the Interdisciplinary Humanities Research Center.

The Teaching African American Material Culture Project was made up of two courses that highlighted different aspects of the African American experience through work with relevant extant historical textual artifacts. The first course, Digital Archive Production, explored the extent to which African Americans have been caricatured in Jim Crow Era ephemera. Students in this course were purposefully confronted with pervasiveness of racism in the graphic design trends of the past. The second course, Scrapbooks as Literary Documents, centered both on the multifaceted legacy of African American educator, writer, and activist, Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) and the idea that scrapbooks can be looked at as narrative texts. This course, which was taught as a seminar, allowed students to look closely at a specific collection of scrapbooks in relation to the literary corpus of an accomplished woman of color.

Both courses were designed around a series of learning outcomes that enhanced skills in race and genre studies, material culture, and the digital humanities. The courses integrated the use of digital technologies in student assignments and final projects. And supplementary activities were likewise integrated in the courses in order to maximize the potential of a fully immersive educational experience. The project's interventions and deliverables, moreover, were achieved well under budget.

Scope & Timeline

The project consisted of two full-credit, semester-long, object-based learning courses, one undergraduate and one graduate level course, taught in the University of Delaware Department of English. The courses were offered in succession during the 2017/2018 academic year. Preparation for the two grant funded courses began in February of 2017. The official termination date is June 15, 2018.

In terms of subjects, both courses were situated primarily in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American print cultures. The courses were open to all majors; more specifically, they were marketed to English majors, History majors, Visual Communications majors, and those majoring in Africana Studies. In terms of enrollment, the courses benefited from representation across the spectrum of majors including STEM fields and the public humanities.

Contents

By the Numbers

- The total enrollment for English 365-012 was 14 undergraduate students

- The total enrollment for English 874-010 was 4 doctoral students

Fall 2017: Digital Archive Production

English 365-012, Digital Archive Production, was an undergraduate, upper division course designed to teach about the history of racism and negative racial stereotyping in nineteenth and twentieth century print culture.

Much of the course pedagogy was developed around the implicit relationship between bibliographic objects (e.g. books and ephemera) and the social construction of racial and ethnic identity. At the broadest levels, however, the course was centered on developing cultural sensitivity and improving cross-cultural race relations.

The format for the course was primarily lecture-based combined with object-based learning. Topics covered in the lectures included racial theories, the transnational history of American blackface performance, book history, poststructuralism and the semiotics of typography, and digital humanities.

The course also featured exposure to relevant audio-visual materials. And it included specialized tours, discussions, special collections research, and gamified assignments.

Working in pairs, students were chiefly tasked with processing items from a collection of historic postcards and trade cards. They were required, moreover, to assess their work with the collection in a reflective essay.

A number of students revealed that their views on race were radically transformed after their completion of the course.

"I thought the professor approached the sensitive course material in an effective way. He also was very understanding of the unconventional nature of the course material, shown through how he communicated with the class." A comment from the student evaluations

Controversial Collection

Students in English 365, Digital Archive Production, worked closely with the Gregory C. Wilson Collection of African American Postcards and Trade Cards (PPI 107). The collection title, however, fails to represent the controversial nature of its contents. The vast majority of ephemera in this collection feature an array of negative racial stereotypes and caricatures of African Americans associated with the Jim Crow Era. The imagery, rooted in blackface performance and antebellum race relations, proliferated in mundane ephemeral objects from around the time of Reconstruction up through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. The utmost care was taken to teach around this collection ethically and with a heightened level of cultural sensitivity.

Learning Outcomes

Digital Archive Production was designed using a set of learning outcomes that were specifically tailored to fit the use of primary source materials in a project that could be supportive of future digital scholarship. Outcomes were organized under the three categories of "Race and Genre," "Material Culture," and "Digital Humanities." Outcomes for the "Race and Genre" category included: 1) Becoming acquainted with concepts of race and racial theories; 2) Developing an understanding of the history of racial stereotypes as exhibited in American blackface minstrelsy; 3) Connecting contemporary understandings of racial caricature to larger trends in American literature, performance, film, and new media; and, 4) Critically analyzing the presence of racial caricature in literary genres and new media.

Outcomes in the "Material Culture" category were developed as follows: 1) Obtaining a basic knowledge of the material history of the production of books and ephemera; 2) Obtaining a basic knowledge of the material history of graphic design trends; 3) Acquiring analytical tools for interpreting graphic design trends in accordance with theories of structural and post-structural semiotics; and, 4) Connecting learning of book and graphic design history to an understanding of race and racial theories.

The third category of "Digital Humanities" covered the following outcomes: 1) Becoming familiar with contemporary archival and computer mediated research; and, 2) Becoming familiar with concepts and adaptive practices for data, metadata, and database construction.

A word cloud generated from the students' reflective essays (see Appendix II)

Digital Footprint: Course Database

The digital component to this course took the form of a collaborative course database (see Appendix I). The current version of the database can be accessed using the following links:

https://sites.google.com/a/udel.edu/digital-archive-production/

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yQ-yGUjGc05k3IuR49-Elcn5JE7caZz2kvywJPqed6Y/edit?usp=sharing

This database was a pedagogical tool designed as a *pseudo* digital archive of an authentic ephemera collection housed in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the University of Delaware Library Special Collections. Given the pedagogical nature of the product, the database was created using the Google Sheets and Google Sites on account of the user friendliness, accessibility, and limited functionality associated with these platforms.

The core set of metadata fields were drawn from the Artstor compatible, Cataloging Cultural Objects schema. Additional metadata fields, such as "Substrate" and "Letterforms," were integrated in the schema in support of the course's learning outcomes. The most noteworthy addition to the schema was the "Context" field. This field was added to deal specifically with the challenge of addressing the racist imagery featured on many of the items in the collection.

Students were prepared to work in groups of four, but that number was paired down to partner work, or two people per group, which was better suited for the enrollment level. Group work was essential for fostering dialog around different perspectives of the same collection. The class processed a total of 21 cards. There were some repeats even though the processing of duplicates was discouraged. Retrieving and extracting material metadata was among the more difficult challenges expressed by the students. Some students were uncomfortable with not including information in a field when such information could not be otherwise obtained. Those that failed to adhere closely to the instructions or missed important lectures expressed that they had no basis of deriving the appropriate information for a particular field.

Thursday, February 15, 2018, Morris Library Student Multimedia Design Center. Students used the Library's VR equipment with Google Tours and Google Earth VR to take a virtual reality tour of important places in Dunbar-Nelson's biography.

Thursday, March 1, 2018. Morris Library, Room 200B. This session featured a scrapbook viewing with an accompanying assignment led by archivist, **Rebecca Johnson-Melvin** and Pauline A. Young Resident, **Grace Adeneye**. Following the viewing, we held a research intensive in the same room where students worked directly with the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers (MSS 113).

Thursday, March 5, 2018, Delaware Historical Society. Students took a walking tour of the Mitchell Center for African American Heritage led by its director, **Angela Winand,** followed by a viewing of relevant materials from their collections.

Thursday, April 19, 2018, Winterthur Museum Library. Another scrapbook viewing session with analysis led by Winterthur librarian, **Jeanne Solensky**.

Thursday, May 23, Memorial Hall, Room 107. The course concluded with presentations of the final projects. Feedback was provided by **Ellen Gruber Garvey** and **Yiqun Jia**.

Other activities included a screening of selected scenes from Richard Thompson's *The Mask and the Mirror* (2012), an in-class database navigation instruction session led by English librarian, **Aimee Gee**, a table reading of Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1919), and an in-class paper-based scrapbooking session.

Spring 2018: Scrapbooks as Literary Documents

English 874-010, Scrapbooks as Literary Documents, was a graduate level seminar designed to work closely with the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers (MSS 113). The archive contains Dunbar-Nelson's literary manuscripts, personal and professional correspondence, and professional records, as well as a comprehensive collection of "self-works" in the form of scrapbooks, diaries, and reading journals.

Students in this course were able to work with a range of scrapbook styles and genres covering more than a century of its development as a paper-craft. Scrapbooking's potential, moreover, as a participatory educational medium was explored through a series of special assignments that not only privileged but incentivized the integration of craft in the underlying pedagogy (see Appendix IV).

The seminar format allowed for lengthy class discussions on a range of topics including Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, poetry, and syndicated column writing, her relationship with Paul Laurence Dunbar, her professional career as an educator and activist, turn-of-the-century respectability politics, and the documentary and narrative functionality of scrapbooks.

Students in English 874 (from left to right): Brandi Locke, Kelsie Shipley, Mali Collins-White, and Frank Desiderio

Learning Outcomes

Scrapbooks as Literary Documents was taught around a set of outcomes that are comparable to those in Digital Archive Production. Included in the "Race and Genre" category: 1) Developing a deeper understanding of early twentieth century race and gender politics; 2) Acquiring tools and methods for bio-bibliographical research into literary figures from underrepresented minority groups; and, 3) Critically analyzing the impact of race, gender, and identity politics on self-documentation and literary production.

For the "Material Culture" category: 1) Gaining the ability to conduct primary source research using historical or cultural artifacts; 2) Attaining a comprehensive knowledge of the form and function of scrapbooks throughout their history; 3) Discerning distinguishing characteristics of various manifestations and samples of scrapbooks from different periods; and, 4) Becoming familiarized with documentary scrapbooking practices.

Included in the "Digital Scholarship" category: 1) Becoming familiar with contemporary archival and computer mediated research; and, 2) Becoming familiar with concepts and adaptive practices for producing scholarly content using digital technologies.

Digital Footprint: Adobe Spark Scrapbook Pages

Using Adobe Spark, with the help of Yiqun Jia (GA), students in the Scrapbooks as Literary Documents created digital scrapbooks as part of their final projects. The digital scrapbooks, which vary widely in content and style, present a visual reinterpretation of their framework essays:

Mali Collins-White wrote about Alice Dunbar-Nelson's teaching career and her relationship to the archive, https://spark.adobe.com/page/4WRp3oUj6Btwv/

Frank Desiderio's work covered Alice Dunbar-Nelson's literary scholarship in the area of canonical British authors, https://spark.adobe.com/page/hrSKAvqDViqs4/

Brandi Locke focused on Alice Dunbar-Nelson's club work and activism, https://spark.adobe.com/page/Pr6rXIBXTHVbE/

Kelsie Shipley explored Alice Dunbar-Nelson's same-sex relationships, https://spark.adobe.com/page/yDjDhBYolsOII/

Impact: Pedagogical Interventions

The pedagogical interventions that resulted from this project can be viewed in terms of its broader impact.

The work of archival contextualization is often completed at the collection and not the object level, and this work is typically done in a collection finding aid. Not all archival collections, however, have finding aids, and digitized collections frequently provide only the most essential information about their individual objects. Contextualization of objects alongside their material metadata represents a major intervention in archival processing workflows.

Crafting as a form of scholarship was another intervention insofar as it provided an alternative to the devaluing of craft as a legitimate form of scholarly communication.

Finally, there was the use of emerging virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies in the classroom. Instead of designing a course around the technology (a common pedagogical approach to integrating technology in the classroom), these technologies were implemented because they were identified as those best equipped to support the course material. The use of AR in the course scrapbook, for example, given its ability to embed digital content into print materials, allowed for a deeper understanding of multi-modal nature of traditional scrapbooks. It worked to challenge falsely held dichotomies separating script from print cultures and print from the digital.
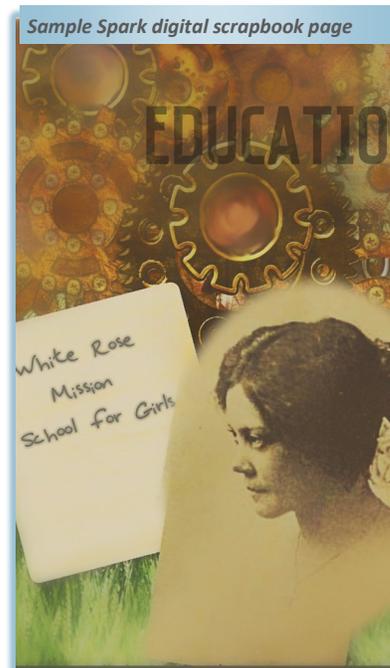
"Contextualization of objects alongside their material metadata represents a major intervention in archival processing workflows."

Project Deliverables: Completed & Ongoing

The current status for the set of deliverables initially proposed for this project has some completed and others still in progress.

Those that have reached their completion, for the most part, are those products that constitute the "digital footprints" for the two courses. As such, they have been covered in their respective sections of this report.

Other completed deliverables (one of which was not listed in the project proposal) include a specialized Alice Dunbar-Nelson-themed Google Tour and an augmented reality collaborative course scrapbook. This AR scrapbook is scheduled for display in a library case exhibit that will open on June 15, 2018.

Other deliverables listed in the proposal, however, are ongoing. These deliverables were proposed as possibilities and, thus, may not ultimately come to fruition.

The most significant deliverable in this category is a curated Omeka site that will showcase the best of the student work intended for public reception. The possibility for an Omeka site of this nature is currently under review, but several factors need to be addressed prior to moving forward. Although Omeka is a platform that has curatorial and digital preservation functionality at its core, it is unclear whether it would be the best fit for the purposes of this deliverable. For one, the University of Delaware Library has recently considered migrating its Omeka-based exhibits to a new platform. It is possible that the Library will use WordPress for future digital exhibitions. Hence, creating this site using WordPress instead of Omeka might present a better option. However, if Omeka is used for the site, it is likely that it will need to be built using Omeka S in place of the classic version of the platform.

Copyrighted materials contained in the archival collections that the courses were structured around is another important consideration. The issue of copyright has obstructed the recent digitization workflow for the Gregory C. Wilson Collection.

Lastly, the University of Delaware Library, Museums, and Press should determine the extent to which a collection of controversial materials can be displayed electronically.

Overall Project Budget

This project was completed well under the estimated budget. Actual expenditures accounted for just over half the estimated amount (see Appendix V).

The gap in spending, which is substantial, is the result of a couple of key factors. The largest amount of savings resulted from a price restructuring in the Adobe Spark platform (reduced by $319.89 per subscriber). Adobe Spark recently introduced a new pricing structure that allows for a free tier of service and a dramatically reduced tier of premium service.

Another point of savings stemmed from the fact that one of the course contributors, Jeanne Solensky, our host for the Winterthur viewing, declined to accept the honorarium that was offered to her.

The amount allocated for scrapbooking materials was overestimated in the proposal, as was the cost for entrance fees. Likewise, much of the savings resulted from the low enrollment numbers for each course as compared with the projected level of enrollment. With the exception of a relatively small, preapproved dining expense for the guest reviewer and graduate assistant (ENGL 874), there was no need to reallocate the remaining funds to other sources.

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Library, Museums, & Press

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Appendix I: Screenshots of the Digital Archive Production Course Database (front and back ends)

Appendix II: Selections from Student Reflective Essays (STEM & Humanities Majors)

"The images in the collection were challenging, but impactful and necessary… In class we learned how harmful these stereotype are in that they impact society negatively with their social injustice, racism, and dehumanization. I suppose it was a good thing that Gregory C. Wilson created the collection so that these demoralizing cards can be used for educational reasons."

"We had been shown copious amounts of examples in class via video or picture on the screen in front of the lecture, yet somehow I found that holding the cards and looking at the original documents left me in so much more awe than I had ever experienced sitting in the lectures."

"As a non-English and non-history major, this course's focus and requirements are ones that I have not been exposed to a lot throughout my college career. Additionally, due to the unique nature of the course, I have been challenged to think about topics that are a prominent but often neglected part of history that continue to influence society today. Moreover, I have had the opportunity to work with a library special collection, which strikingly captures the sensitive topics discussed in lecture."

"The class has really exposed the controversial nature of things that I would have thought to be completely benign, such as Aunt Jemima's syrup being a reference to the Minstrel Mammy caricature, and the racial tension between and racial history behind Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. Instead of shunning away like I would have in the past, the class has encouraged me to really delve into the discomfort of these topics. They are real and they make me uncomfortable for a reason—to ignore this feeling and try to forget about it would not do justice to the people and traditions that they mock."

"The information we learned about Blackface Minstrel shows and other forms of racism during this time period helped me understand the derogatory words and images shown in the postcards. The way African American culture is depicted in them is extremely exaggerated and demeaning."

"Even upon only reading a short description of the class I already had questions to ask: What around me is subliminally racist? What racist symbols have been implanted in our culture? What are the origins of these symbols?"

"The cards, albeit disturbing to the modern mind, held me in a state or morbid curiosity. The images detailed upon them ranged from a mundane black and white still of slaves picking cotton, to fantastic, gay, splashes of colors depicting multiple men running from a crocodile in Mississippi."

Appendix III: Screenshots of the Adobe Spark Scrapbook Pages

"The tradition of representing Black people as decent and moral historical agents has meant the erasure of a broad array of Black sexuality and gendered being in favor of a static heterosexual narrative."

~Mattie Udora Richardson, "No More Secrets, No More Lies: African-American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality," Journal of Women's History, Vol. 15, No. 3
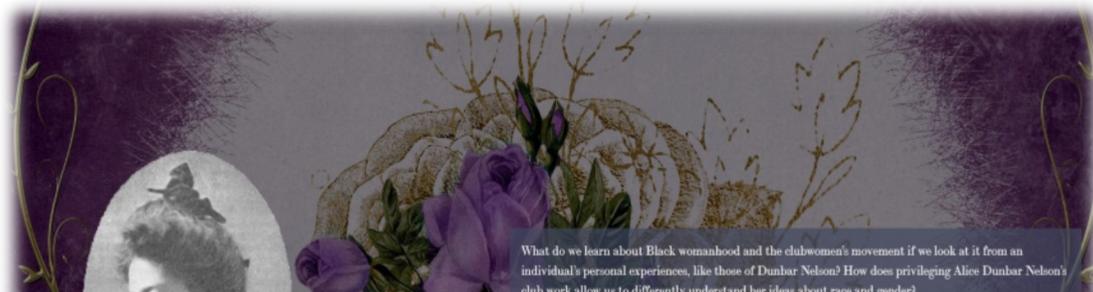
"I believe I'm going to get over that Fay trouble. Hope so."

What do we learn about Black womanhood and the clubwomen's movement if we look at it from an individual's personal experiences, like those of Dunbar Nelson? How does privileging Alice Dunbar Nelson's club work allow us to differently understand her ideas about race and gender?

Appendix IV: Selections from the AR Course Scrapbook

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Appendix V: Budget Line Items (Estimated and Actual Expenditures)

	A	B
1	Teaching African American Material Culture with Digital Humanities - Jesse Erickson, PhD, MLIS Fall 2017 -Spring 2018 [Estimated Expenditures]	
2	Honorarium for Ray Nichols - tour of Lead Graffiti Letterpress Studio	500
3	UD or Delaware Express bus rental for tour of Lead Graffiti Letterpress Studio 2 x two-hour trips @ 94.60 each* or $350 each if Delaware Express	750
4	Honorarium for Rich McKinstry, Winterthur	500
5	Honorarium for DE historian - Delaware Historical Society tour	350
6	Honorarium and travel expenses for Ellen Grubar Garvey - review of students' curated work	1,000
7	Entrance fees related to Winterthur and Delaware Historical Society tours	539
8	if DE Express	750
9	Scrapbooking materials for student production	816
10	Adobe Spark one-year licenses for 14 users @ 419.88 per user	5878.32
11	Graduate assistant on s-contract or course buyout @ Instructor rate, Spring 2018	5,000
12	GA fringe benefits @3.8%	190
13	TOTAL	**16273.32**
14		
15		
16	* Bus estimates based on use of UD Charter Bus service at $47.30 per hour FY17. May increase if other service is needed or base rate goes up.	
17		
18		

	A	B
1	Teaching African American Material Culture with Digital Humanities - Jesse Erickson, PhD, MLIS Fall 2017 -Spring 2018 [Actual Expenditures]	
2	Honorarium for Ray Nichols - tour of Lead Graffiti Letterpress Studio	500
3	UD or Delaware Express bus rental for tour of Lead Graffiti Letterpress Studio 1 x two-hour trips @ 170.00 and 158.00 for Delaware Express	328
4	Honorarium for Rich McKinstry, Winterthur (declined to receive payment)	0
5	Honorarium for DE historian - Delaware Historical Society tour	350
6	Honorarium and travel expenses for Ellen Gruber Garvey - review of students' curated work	1,000
7	Lunch with E. Garvey and GA (Yiqun Jia)	76
8	Entrance fees related to Winterthur and Delaware Historical Society tours	20
9	Travel related to Winterthur and Delaware Historical Society 2 3-hour trips DE Express	550
10	Scrapbooking materials for student production	520
11	Adobe Spark one-year licenses for 6 users @ 99.99 per user	599.93
12	Graduate assistant (Yiqun Jia) on s-contract or course buyout @ Instructor rate, Spring 2018	4,470
13	GA fringe benefits @3.8%	190
14	TOTAL	**8603.77**

QUOINS

PRESS FURNITURE (metal)