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Disturbing Public Memory in Community Writing Partnerships

This article analyzes a public memory pedagogical partnership that disturbed the public memory of a community organization as an egalitarian space. How students, community partners, and I negotiated privately and represented publicly this legacy of the United States' worst shame required us—and me—to figure out what partnership and collaboration mean in this context, whose interests come first and why, and the ethical implications of my and our choices.

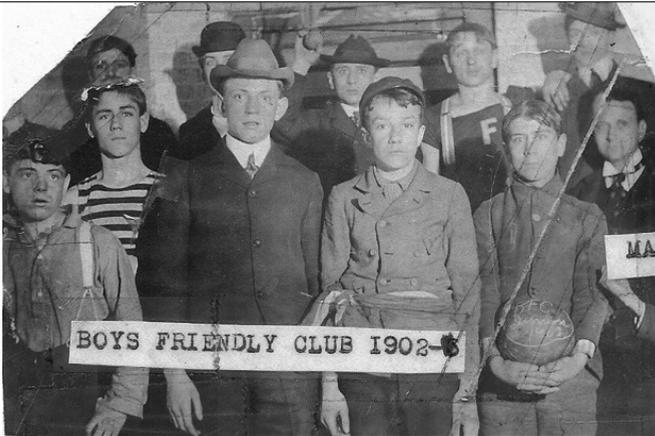


Figure 1. Boys Friendly Club, 1902–03.

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I was immediately drawn to the above photograph, “Boys Friendly Club 1902–3,” that is now the cover of the student-written booklet, *A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club of Reading, Pennsylvania*. I stared at the boys’ faces, looked into their eyes. Who were these boys who attended Boys Friendly Club in 1902–03, their faces so visibly different than those of the boys and girls attending the Olivet Boys & Girls Club (“the Olivet”) in Reading, the organization that began as Boys Friendly Club? In the first three decades of the twentieth century, when Reading’s total population was 99% white, 0.9% black, and less than 1/10 of 1% for all other races (1910, 1920, 1930 censuses), Boys Friendly Club served an important function: “a decent place” for “the typical working boy” to play after a ten-hour work day (McCormick 50). Thomas Chew, treasurer of the General Alliance of Workers with Boys, comments about his visit to Olivet in 1907, saying, “the lads are a husky lot, mostly Dutch in race and Lutheran in creed.” As Boys Friendly Club founder William McCormick describes them, the Olivet boy “hangs out on the corner of an evening, or . . . wanders up and down the street looking for trouble, or . . . makes a round of show going, or . . . loiters about the pool room” (42–43). “What I am after,” McCormick states, “is a more respectable and rational form of fun, one that will lead elsewhere than to the prison and have its finale in something better than trouble and sin and remorse” (56). But these children of working-class immigrants and their families are largely excluded from the city of Reading’s dominant public memory as an industrial giant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, home to the Reading Railroad made famous by the board game Monopoly.¹

Today, the city of Reading, located in southeastern Pennsylvania approximately 65 miles west of Philadelphia and 125 miles southwest of New York City, is 9% African American, 62% Hispanic/Latino, and 26% white (2013 census). Reading is publicly known for its high poverty rate; since its ranking in 2011 as the poorest city in the United States among cities with over 65,000 residents (number six in 2012, two in 2013, and seven in 2014), Reading has been called “a shadow of its former, bustling self” (Everline). Like other northeastern cities that helped transform the US economy from agrarian to industrial, Reading has an unemployment rate over 15% and a steady erosion of homeownership—it is a “struggling” city, hindered by “being in a relatively weak economic subregion” and “the need to integrate

an influx of Latino households without the economic base to offer them adequate economic opportunities” (Mallach 142). According to scholar Mark Reisinger, Latinos and African Americans are largely segregated in the central city area of Reading, leading to a large proportion of households in which Spanish is the main language, a high percentage of Latinos with low levels of educational attainment, and Latino neighborhoods suffering from high poverty rates. Jon Scott, president and CEO of Greater Reading Economic Partnership, noted that as of 2014, there had been little improvement in Reading’s economic development in recent years (Lenton and Urban). In the Reading School District, 89% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; further, 9.2% of the population is African American, 81.5% Hispanic/Latino, 6.5% white, and 2.7% multiracial (“Reading”). The Olivet Boys & Girls Club serves 3,000–4,000 children and youth per year: 82% live at or below the poverty level; 62% are Hispanic/Latino, 23% are African American, 6% are multiracial, and 9% are white; 59% are male, and 41% are female (“About Us”).

Thus, one of my primary motivations of a multise­mester, multicourse community writing project in which undergraduate students, community partners from the Olivet (leadership, staff, and alumni), and faculty collaborated to document, preserve, and disseminate a history of this 117-year-old organization was to challenge Reading’s public memory and to reveal that more than a century later, Reading is both very different and very much the same. As Elizabeth Martinez and Arnol­do Garcia argue, the “neo” in *neoliberalism* refers to a revival of economic liberalism that prevailed in the United States through the 1800s and early 1900s, both eras of vast wealth and mass poverty.

As Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas claim, “Remains of the past are all about us, and all about us they fall away into oblivion—unless we intervene” (1). Intervening in the remains of the past, students, community partners, and faculty brought into public visibility a small but important portion of the hidden remains of the Olivet boys, their families, and their neighbors, educating college students, the youth at Olivet, and the community about poverty’s intractable nature and the complex intersections of race, class, gender, and ethnicity in Reading—then and now.

But as Roth and Salas further observe, when we “intervene in the remains of the past . . . our choices of *what is to remain* often means disturbing remains that are already there” (1, italics in original). Research into

the archived materials and newspaper articles exposed the prevalence of minstrel shows in Olivet's history, disturbing the dominant public memory of the *Olivet organization* as an egalitarian, inclusive space. Minstrel shows

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and blackface contradict the organization's long-held and revered story of itself as a historically welcoming place that embraces boys (and eventually girls) of all races and ethnicities, especially those who are marginalized. Understandably, coming to terms with recovered memories of minstrel shows, a past they wish did not exist, was perplexing, difficult, and deeply emotional for the Olivet leadership. Because public memory is about the present and future as well as the past, "what we remember and how we remember it . . . can tell us something significant about who we are as a people now, about the contemporary social and political issues that divide us, and about who we may become" (Biesecker). How we in the Olivet project negotiated privately and represented publicly this legacy of the United States' worst shame reminds us of the challenges and necessity of coming to terms with slavery's past and racism's present and future. As Ira Berlin argues, "For slavery, like race, also carries with it deep anger, resentment, indignation, and bitterness for some and embarrassment, humiliation, and shame for others, along with large drafts of denial. Almost 140 years after slavery's demise, the question still sits on tender and sensitive ground" (1259).

Figuring out *what to do* about this revealed memory, given all constituencies in the partnership and the various audiences we hoped to target, points to public memory as "a commonly held asset . . . whose use is continually negotiated by diverse constituencies" and is marked by power, expertise, ethics, and resources (Greer and Grobman 2). Thus disturbing public memory required us—and me—to figure out what partnership and collaboration mean in this context, whose interests come first and why, and the ethical implications of my and our choices. In such a moment, how do we negotiate pedagogy, partnership, public memory, rhetoric, ethics, and social justice? And what are the implications for pedagogy and community writing partnerships? I share this story precisely because I have some answers, not *the* answer(s), and I hope to spur further inquiry and conversations.

Negotiating Minstrelsy's Public Memory

The multise­mester Olivet public memory and history project included nearly two hundred students and three faculty in seven courses; five of these classes were taught by me: sophomore-level writing in the social sciences (spring 2014), capstone in professional writing (spring 2014), rhetoric and composition (fall 2014 and spring 2015), and women writers (fall 2014). The other two courses, civic and community engagement and second-year composition, were taught by other faculty in spring 2014 and fall 2014, respectively. My analysis of public memory and community writing in this article is based on the three writing classes I taught; the collective processes of production and reception among all students, faculty, and community partners; and the two print compilations, *A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club of Reading, Pennsylvania* (Book 1), and *A History of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club in Reading, Pennsylvania, Continued* (Book 2). Together, these books, printed and disseminated locally and also available online, include a total of thirty oral histories of alumni and sixty-eight short articles on topics like the marathons from Reading to Lebanon and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; founder William McCormick's professional life; basketball leagues and championships; the Mothers Club; the Fathers Club; the Olivet free, coed kindergarten; activities for girls throughout the twentieth century; and many more. Ordinary people become part of public memory by "being publicly noted" (Casey 19). Students discovered, for example, that "Both the boys and men of the club built the pool" in approximately two months, and it was the first outdoor pool in Reading (written by Evan Unruh); that the Olivet "boy" killed in World War 1 was Joseph Sowa (Jared Moser); and that on July 21, 1909, William McCormick took eleven boys on a trip to New York City (Margaret Nina).

We also learned a bit about their lives as "working boys"—why they worked, where they worked, and the relationship between their working lives and their alleged delinquent behavior. We had glimpses into the lives of girls and women, although much more remains to be uncovered. And we had conversations about the classed, raced, gendered, and other inequities, including different classifications of whiteness, in the Progressive Era. Students learned that as public memorialists, they could "unsettl[e] some of the fixed notions of the past" (Ahmed 276).

Yet, unsettling the past also revealed the prevalence of minstrel shows and blackface activities performed by and sponsored by the Olivet Boys Club as late as 1966. Flyers, theater programs, newspaper articles, and photographs in the archived materials provided to us by Olivet leadership and in the local newspaper advertised and celebrated minstrel shows performed at Olivet and around the city. Especially astounding was the rousing language used to describe the shows, with newspaper headlines such as “Olivet Boys Score Hit with Minstrel” (1932) and “A Decided Success: Olivet Boys Present a Breezy Show” (1923). The shows were often held over several evening and matinee performances as church, firehouse, and other charity events. Sometimes the Olivet boys, men, and women traveled to Philadelphia to perform minstrel shows.

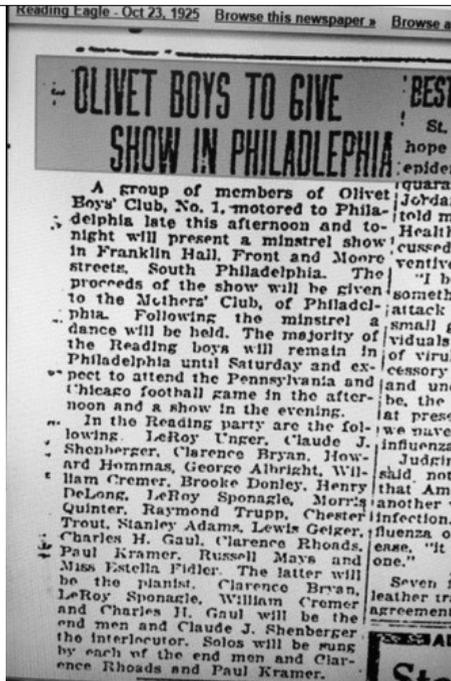


Figure 2. “Olivet Boys to Give Show in Philadelphia,” *Reading Eagle*, October 23, 1925.

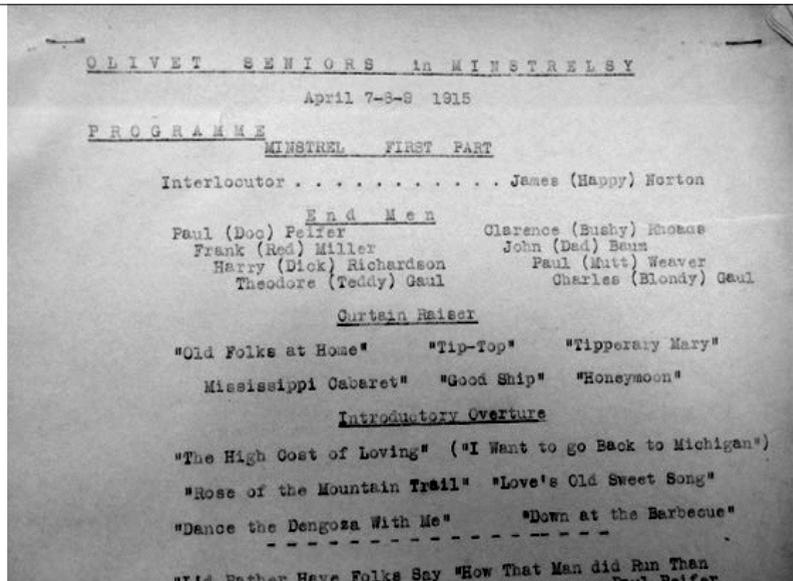


Figure 3. Olivet Theater Program, 1915.

White minstrel shows (whites performing in blackface) were among the most popular forms of entertainment in both the North and South beginning in the nineteenth century and through part of the twentieth century (Schroeder 142). Minstrelsy and blackface are complex phenomena, but the consensus among scholars today is that minstrel shows and blackface “pretend[ed] that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (Lott 23) and, as a result, were used by pro-slavery advocates to justify slavery. Furthermore, as Patricia R. Schroeder asserts,

The widespread popularity of [blackface] characters throughout the nineteenth century ensured that stage depictions of African Americans, which were actually caricatures of blackness performed by white men, had little to do with black culture or actual black experience. Through their performances, however, white minstrels in blackface created a socially accepted definition of race, scripting racial difference as inferiority. (142)

In other words, minstrelsy and blackface misrepresented African Americans, influencing many Americans’ (mis)understanding and dehumaniza-

tion of African Americans. Moreover, minstrelsy and blackface generated and perpetuated egregious misconceptions and stereotypes about African Americans that linger today.

The drive to forget the “tough stuff” of public memory (Horton and Horton, Introduction xiii) has been theorized by many memory scholars, especially in relation to US slavery as well as the Holocaust (for example, Horton and Horton, *Slavery*; Linenthal; Levy and Sznaider). How does a nation deal with its “indigestible narratives,” asks Edward T. Linenthal, referring in particular to “the enduring legacies of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and . . . the modern civil rights era,” that “stick like a fishbone in the nation’s throat” (213)? He argues that the two main strategies have been to “deny its presence, minimize its seriousness, and ignore its enduring scars” and to “transfor[m] [it] into something benign” (214). These are the issues with which I, community partners, and students were confronted as our public memory revisionist project shed light on a past that was not completely unknown but had been long suppressed and, perhaps, willfully forgotten.

Negotiating the Public Memory of Minstrelsy

As I read over the shoulder of an African American student’s draft-in-progress, I was shocked to see a full paragraph praising the man she was researching for his role as director and performer in Olivet’s minstrel shows. Although I am an experienced social justice and multicultural educator and have dealt with ethical dilemmas of public memory and historical recovery, it upset me that this student came upon this hurtful information. Additionally, my personal investment in the Olivet organization and its children—I am a board member, and I volunteer with children from ages six to twelve on a regular basis—made this situation especially painful.

As I spoke to this student and then to the class as a whole, I found out that neither she nor most of my students of any races and ethnicities had knowledge of the significance, history, or implications of minstrel shows or blackface. And I learned that a good half of the students had come across information about minstrel shows and blackface activities in their primary research. In the essays on the Mothers Club (later the Women’s Auxiliary), the Olivet summer camps, the club locations, and several individuals, students had written about minstrel shows with no understanding of the meaning and significance of the history they’d uncovered.

Immediately, I facilitated a discussion about our options. Students and I reflected on what it would mean to remove history and memory from the book that aimed to bring marginalized members of the community into visibility. We discussed facing the truth of our nation's—and this community's—past. For the first time, some of the students understood why “dressing up” in blackface even today is considered offensive and hurtful. Students and I also discussed the ethical implications of publicly remembering minstrelsy at Olivet for the readers of the book, especially the African American children and youth at the Olivet Boys & Girls Club today. As I had explained to students at the start, the book was for the children and youth at Olivet today, to place their lives and experiences in a historical context. Public memory is as much, if not more, about the present and future than the past. Race is not invisible among these children at all; in fact, the African American and Latino girls I have worked with for more than a year often talk about and compare their skin color, at times with an internalized hierarchical “value” ascribed to lighter shades. How would the African American children and youth feel? Was it our place to tell them of their cherished club's racist past?

I approached our community partners, Jeffrey Palmer, then Olivet president and CEO, and Richard DeGroot, who has worked in various roles at Olivet for twenty-five years, and unsurprisingly, the collective discussion and the decision-making process was relatively easy.² By then, DeGroot, Palmer, and I had cultivated strong, respectful, and open relationships. Both men were integrally involved with the partnership throughout the project; they came to many of our classes, met with students individually, held “office hours” in our makeshift archives room, corresponded with students by email and phone, and coordinated interviews with Olivet alumni. DeGroot and I corresponded almost daily for much of the project as we both became enthusiastic (some called us obsessive!) about researching and sharing our findings from *newspapers.com*. We also became and remain friends.

DeGroot, Palmer, and I agreed the information about minstrelsy needed to be in the book, but we also considered the feelings of African American staff, alumni, and children. We agreed to remove the references to minstrelsy and blackface in the student-authored essays; instead, I would write an essay, which they would review, about the minstrelsy and blackface phenomenon and our collaborative decision to handle it this way. We aimed to educate readers about minstrelsy and blackface activities in

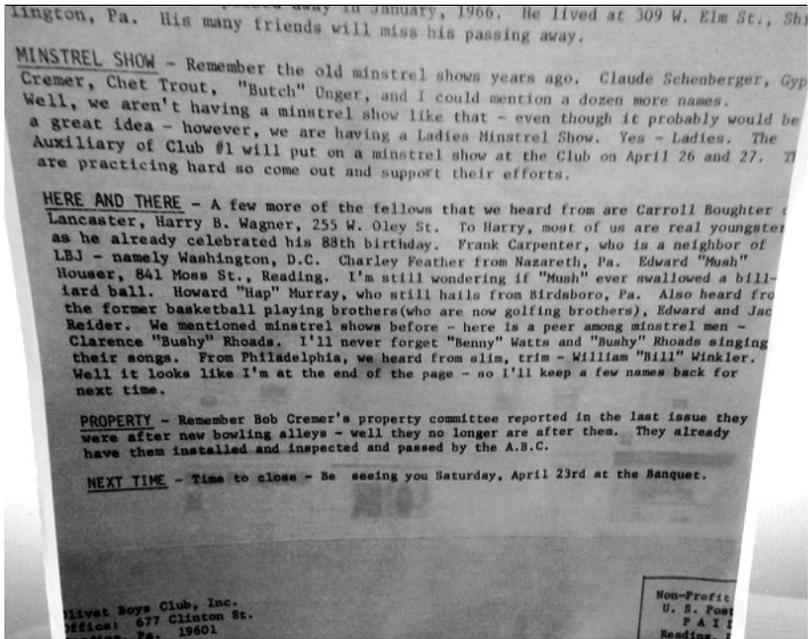


Figure 4. Olivet Boys & Girls Club "Old-Timers" newsletter, 1966.

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as acknowledge Olivet's sponsorship and promotion of these activities in the first three decades of its history. The final paragraph of this essay publicly pledged our commitment to presenting the history of Olivet, race, and ethnicity truthfully and sensitively.

But when students uncovered evidence of a minstrel show in an Olivet Boys & Girls Club "Old-Timers" newsletter from 1966 during the research process for the second book, our partnership was put to the test. DeGroot and I worked together to select topics for students to research for both books. Our interest in the topic of African Americans at the Olivet for the second book was spurred by the exposure of minstrelsy in Book 1; retrospectively, I'm convinced we were all hoping and expecting to "vindicate" the Olivet as a racially humane and just institution. And then the minstrel show in 1966 surprised and confused us all.

Because public memory occurs "out in the open, in front of and with others" (Phillips 4), and because "memories are open to contest, revision,

and rejection” (2), publicly remembering minstrelsy at the Olivet became a contested negotiation. DeGroot, Palmer, and I found ourselves with multiple, varying, and even competing interests. Moving forward required that we pay “attention to the importance of involving multiple stake-holders in the processes of ethical decision-making when public memory is being produced” (Greer and Grobman 3).

Primary among the stakeholders were first-year composition students Stephen Hunsicker and Brad Hoffman, who selected the topic of African Americans in Olivet’s history, aware that minstrel shows were prevalent at least through the 1940s. I painstakingly explained to them the issues surrounding minstrelsy and blackface activities and the decisions made around the inclusion of these activities in Book 1. Stephen and Brad conducted thorough research given the limited time and resources available. In addition to scouring the archives and the newspaper, the students interviewed several African American Olivet alumni, including Reading’s mayor, Vaughn Spencer, and his brother, Gary Spencer. Several times and through various drafts, Stephen and Brad debated with one another and with me about where to put the minstrel show information. The submitted draft of their essay, approved by me and sent to DeGroot and Palmer for review, follows:

In 1898, when The Boys Friendly Club (later to become the Olivet Boys Club) was first formed, Reading’s population was only about 0.67% African American, according to the 1900 United States Census (Grobman and Kunkelman 96–98). Since there were so few African Americans in the area, the club served and provided these activities for white boys. The African American boys in the city of Reading at this time were often discriminated against (Palmer 2014). However, as times went on things began to change. In 1935, the Olivet Boys Club hosted a “Federal Education for Negroes Program.” This was part of Herbert Hoover’s Emergency Relief Program to provide assistance to the citizens. The Federal Education Program was designed to give African Americans safe activities to participate in (“Federal Education Program for Negroes”).

African Americans were first seen attending Olivet Boys Club in photographs in 1954. After speaking with multiple black and white members of the Olivet Clubs in the 1950s and 1960s, we learned that none had experienced nor witnessed any discrimination at Olivet from other kids or staff members. Also, State Senator James E. Norton, who was also a director at the Olivet Boys’ club in 1928, said that “The club has no scheme of religion, no color prejudice” (“Rotarians” 1928). Numerous photographs, however, showed African Americans standing with one another.

Throughout history all of the Olivet Clubs were not the same related

to African Americans. Club No. 1 one on Clinton Street had a large African American community because it was located in an African American neighborhood. However, Club No. 4 on Mulberry Street was in a white, blue-collar neighborhood so was 99% white until the late 1960s (Spencer, G. 2014). The Olivet Clubs tried to allow African Americans to experience typical everyday activities they normally would not be able to participate in. For example African Americans were not allowed to swim in the only city pool that was in Reading. Once the Olivet Pool opened in 1921, they allowed African Americans to swim, and it was the only clean and safe place available for them to swim (Spencer, V. 2014). As Gary Spencer recalls it, Club No. 4 was only about 2% black while 97% white in 1964. However, in the mid-1970s, it was about 18% Black, 80% White, with the Hispanic population beginning to grow both in the Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs and in the city of Reading in general (Spencer, Gary, 2014). In the 1980s, Olivet Club No. 1's members were about 80% Black (Palmer, 2014).

As time continued to pass, more African Americans made Reading their home, according to census data. Census data from 2012 records 13.2% of the population in Reading to be African American. At Olivet, about 26% of the kids who currently attend are African American ("Olivet Boys and Girls" 2014).

Despite the lack of racism reported by Olivet Boys and Girls Club alumni, minstrel shows were performed by Olivet personnel and boys through the 1960s. Minstrel shows were one of the most popular forms of entertainment around the country during the early 1900s (Schroeder, 2010, 142). These shows often created humor by acting as slavery was justified. Minstrel shows typically led to stereotypes and perpetuated racist attitudes. Minstrel shows were a very common occurrence at Olivet with numerous shows performed yearly to a max crowd. The first minstrel show that occurred at Olivet was in 1915 called "Scrambled Blackberries ("Reading Man," 1915)." One of the most popular minstrel shows was performed April 25, 1919 at Club No. 2 in West Reading ("West Reading," 1917). This one was called "Old Black Joe," written in 1885. Later in October 1925, Olivet boys traveled to Philadelphia to give the minstrel show in Franklin Hall in South Philadelphia. The final documented minstrel show we found was held in April 1966 ("Minstrel Show").

When DeGroot and Palmer read the essay, the minstrel shows became a point of tension. They felt minstrelsy had been sufficiently addressed in Book 1 and that the placement of minstrel shows as the final paragraph of this student essay undermined the egalitarian, progressive content of the essay as a whole. They also felt that the later minstrel shows, especially the one in 1966, were not blackface shows.

Stephen and Brad had also by this time begun researching and writing an essay on minstrelsy, trying to understand how the Olivet organiza-

tion could have had minstrel shows. They cited a great deal of scholarship supporting the consensus view that blackface minstrel shows were racist, offensive, and perpetuated racism and egregious stereotypes. They also discussed an article in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, in which ethnomusicologist and assistant professor Susan Hurley-Glowa concluded, "Long after most Americans had found blackface minstrelsy demeaning, performances continued in isolated rural areas, with no apparent racist intent." Hurley-Glowa focuses on minstrel shows in the Adirondacks town of Colton, New York, in the late 1950s, claiming that while "Blackface minstrelsy is no longer acceptable, and it is hard to imagine that anyone would mourn its passing," minstrel shows

served the needs of Colton. The minstrel shows helped establish community solidarity through music, strengthening bonds by involving citizens of all ages and occupations and providing an opportunity to reflect on Colton's past and present. Putting on blackface allowed the local community to mock itself in an open and unconstrained way, something that seems to occur whenever people put on masks.

For Stephen and Brad, Hurley-Glowa's analysis provided a degree of credibility to the Olivet leadership's insistence that the shows were not racist and that blackface minstrelsy was popular and therefore acceptable *at that time*. For example, they wrote,

The phenomenon of minstrel shows is very complex and difficult to understand when looking back on them. Everyone has heard the cliché expression "well times were different back then." . . . This does not excuse the racist or discriminatory remarks but it does take into account that the culture and society they were brought up in was vastly different then it is today. . . . One person Dr. Hurley-Glowa interviewed stated that impersonating blacks in today's world would be racist and offensive, but they stressed the shows were "not about race." According to them the shows were not about making fun of African Americans, it was just a musical comedy that suited them (Hurley-Glowa). No articles in the *Reading Eagle* could be found indicating any blatant racism or hate when advertising or describing minstrel shows.

But as the students and I discussed, that logic would imply that slavery was not racist either. And we could not ignore the Olivet "Old Timers" 1966 newsletter's language that did not indicate to us that this was no longer a blackface show, nor that the writer(s) of the newsletter considered blackface shows from "years ago" problematic in any way:

Remember the old minstrel shows years ago? Claude Schenberger, “Gyp” Cremer, Chet Trout, “Butch” Unger, and I could mention a dozen more names. Well, we aren’t having a minstrel show like that—even though it probably would be a great idea—however we are having a Ladies Minstrel Show. Yes—Ladies. . . . They are practicing hard so come out and support their efforts.

In the end, we agreed, however tentatively, that we will probably never know why the Olivet organization would have supported minstrel shows. Yet we also knew we should not and could not hide it from public memory.

By now, the semester was over, and Brad and Stephen had decided not to participate further in any editing or revising of their essay. Their decision is common for students in my experiences with community-based research

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projects. From the start, I inform students that there are several levels of fact-checking and review and that they have the choice to stay involved after the semester ends, but that final decisions are negotiated by me and our partners. Students generally are surprised that they lose control

of *their* writing, spurring discussions about who owns writing and the meanings of authorship and collaboration. For most students, however, especially first-year writers, the course ends and they choose to move on, excited about seeing their work in print, but uninterested in further writing or editing.

At this point in the book production process, I handed over Stephen and Brad’s essay to an undergraduate editorial assistant, Kimberly Grinberg. I tasked Kimberly with trying to achieve the delicate balance I thought our community partners wanted: that minstrel shows would be acknowledged, but the emphasis would remain on the organization’s embrace of African Americans as attested to in the bulk of the essay. Kimberly was just beginning an extensive scholarly essay on her roles as both student writer and editorial assistant in this project, and she embraced this next editorial challenge. Kimberly explains her revision decisions in her essay:

I changed the placement of the minstrel show paragraph into the center of the piece, as it was initially the conclusion of the article, which seemed to give it more authority and meaning than the rest of the article. I then started the paragraph by noting the popularity of the minstrel shows within the United

States, as I thought this would alleviate the defensiveness of the organization. After all, the practice was very popular in the United States throughout the early 20th century and late 19th century, and the students had cited this in the article as well. After offering a context for the shows, I objectively pieced in the history the students had written about the minstrel shows, including their frequency and success. Immediately following, I offered evidence that neither alumni nor employees remembered any discrimination within the club. I included a quote from an Olivet authority figure [former CEO Jeffrey Palmer], noting how peripheral the shows actually were. Immediately following the paragraph about minstrel shows, there is a discussion of demographics of the different clubs, as written by the students.

I thought that the revision was successful in preserving the three principles I was guided by. The voices of the students were definitely retained, the minstrel shows remained present and therefore history was not being hidden, and lastly, the minstrel shows were presented in a way that made them less important than the rest of the good work the Olivet had done for minority youth.

Unfortunately, our community partners disagreed; they were very firm in their request that the minstrel show paragraph be removed from the article on African Americans. As stated by Palmer, in an interview with Kimberly for her essay,

The minstrel shows were a small and I feel insignificant part of our long history. I was told they were started by the ladies auxiliary as a fundraiser back in the Al Jolson area who performed blackface on Broadway. The ladies still had minstrel type shows when I was a kid but they were a variety show and blackface was no longer in vogue. The shows when I was a kid were performed once a year.

At this point, I made the difficult decision to remove the paragraph about minstrel shows from the student-authored essay and to reprint a slightly modified version of the essay on minstrel shows and blackface from Book 1. I felt I had pushed hard enough with the community partners, and the tension was undermining our productive and meaningful partnership. Among other considerations was Brad and Stephen's article, on which they'd worked so hard to research and write. I did not want to remove the entire article or topic from the book, and I am sure they would have been disappointed had I done so.

Kimberly writes in her essay that she was "discouraged" by my decision. Despite our many conversations, Kimberly continues, "I was disappointed

that the organization and myself/the students, did not agree about the importance of recognizing the minstrel shows. I noted that the decisions about the article were being made by myself, my editor, the organization's leaders, and the students who wrote the article, none of whom were African American." Finally, though, after several conversations with me, Kimberly makes peace (however tentatively) with the minstrelsy decision-making through the lens of her theoretical merging of feminist research methods with community-based research, arguing that both research methodologies "reward collaboration, celebrate risk-taking and create informed citizens."

Yet, this decision continues to weigh on me. Public memory and public forgetting are intensely important and impactful. Will my difficult decision

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to remove minstrel shows from the individual student essays, especially the article on African Americans at the Olivet, perpetuate racism in contemporary society by not directly confronting it? I cannot help but think of the title of David W. Blight's essay, "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be." Did we tell it like it was, even if we removed the minstrelsy paragraph from the African American essay while still acknowledging its presence in my introductory essay? Or is it the best that could have come out of this moral quandary with multiple stakeholders and differing interests such that minstrel shows in Reading and in Olivet's history have now come to light, subject to public dialogue and further remembering? The seriousness of these issues are further amplified in the context of the pedagogical and community partnership implications of public memory and community writing projects.

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Undergraduate Students and Primary Research Ethics

The archives' disclosure of minstrelsy and blackface in this public memory project raises serious questions about the ethics of primary research with undergraduates. Recent scholarship has delved into the ethics of archival research (Kirsch and Royster; Kirsch and Rohan; McKee and Porter) and has begun to consider the connection between primary research and pedagogy (Buehl et al.; Hayden). This collaboration intensifies many of the ethical issues raised by Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter, and also both affirms and complicates their "one simple rhetorical strategy to help researchers

address those issues: dialogue with multiple stakeholders, the multiple audiences involved in any archival research project” (61).

The “Olivet archive,” as we called it, is what John C. Brereton and Cinthia Gannett refer to as “the small a archives,” or “out-of-the-way places” (675), and was an incredibly rich and unique source of access to the past; yet, it is also “situated, incomplete, and partial” (679), raising many of the theoretical, ethical, and pragmatic issues affecting archives’ capacities to accurately represent truth identified by Lynée Lewis Gaillet, Wendy Hayden, and others. This archive is a collection of several thousand documents and artifacts in binders and boxes collected over 116 years by individuals affiliated with Olivet, including written histories; building leases; invitations to “The Old Timers Club” annual banquets; flyers for various activities; daily schedules; announcements of classes and programs; photographs of athletic events, teams, and other activities; newsletters; personal letters between members and alumni; founder William McCormick’s will; and song lyrics. There were also pins, medals, and a wool baseball uniform, including socks, from the 1930s. Working with the primary research sources was a new and challenging endeavor for most students.

Students and I had numerous discussions and debates about the archive’s limitations as well as its significance to what should (and should not) be publicly remembered and why. In the Olivet project, not only did the archives, newspapers, and interviews serve to revise public memory, but each type of source was itself rhetorical, further reinforcing the relationship between rhetoric, public memory, and civic engagement as well as presenting new kinds of research for students.

Students learn how blurry ethical decisions may be, especially those with a lot at stake, and bringing them into the process of ethical decision making was informative for me as a scholar-teacher and profoundly educative for them. As Gesa Kirsch explained in her interview with McKee and Porter, reflecting on ethical issues “is a complex process. I think it takes courage to be open enough and thoughtful and reflective enough [. . .] to change what you do—to change directions” (qtd. in McKee and Porter 64). In our conversations about the implications of removing minstrelsy from the book, we also considered the “researchers’ ethical responsibilities to individuals and communities represented in the archives and to their descendants” (McKee and Porter 61). These archived materials were saved arbitrarily, and likely without the consent of those who appear in the various

documents. Is there a reason, McKee and Porter ask, to keep private the documents and the information they reveal (70)? Students and I debated what it might mean for descendants of McCormick, for example, to learn of minstrel activities under his leadership? “The McCormicks were a prominent family in South Central Pennsylvania who greatly influenced history and commerce in that area of the country,” according to the McCormick Family Papers website, a project of the Center for Pennsylvania Cultural Studies at the Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg and the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Thus disturbing Olivet’s public memory may damage reputations beyond the Berks County community. Further, McKee and Porter raise the moral quandary of “third parties,” “people identified in archival documents that they did not produce and that they do not have control or ownership rights over” (75). In the Olivet public memory project, many people—including those who were children at the time—would be publicly exposed as involved in minstrel performances. Students asked whether the opinion that whites performing in blackface was “acceptable” behavior at that time would affect what we should or should not expose or hide or even think or feel about those who participated. This was the ethical dilemma with which Stephen and Brad had grappled. Judith M. Panitch reminds us that “archives as ‘sites of memory’ are very much products of their time, invested with a meaning that may be changed . . . by changing beliefs and values” (30). And thus our responsibility, according to Gesa Kirsch, would be to “represent them as complex human beings” (qtd. in McKee and Porter 70), something we could not do given that many were unidentified as well as due to the limitations of time, resources, and materials.

As Eli Goldblatt emphasizes, “insuring quality instruction and learning” is a critical responsibility of instructors who involve students in community writing partnerships (203).³ I carefully design these courses to align with the best practices endorsed by the most recent version of the WPA Outcomes Statement. But community writing pedagogies also work in reverse, and in the case of the Olivet public memory partnership, work to further illuminate the very complexities of the writing process: enacting and exposing the fluidity of individual and collaborative writing; sharing in decision making with their peers, with me, and with our community partners; positioning students as rhetorical agents with both authority

and limitations; and bringing to light the ethics of primary research in undergraduate writing courses.

Navigating Community Writing Partnerships

The exposure of minstrelsy and blackface has much to teach about pursuing the widely agreed upon principles of community writing and community-based research—collaboration, democratization of knowledge, reciprocity, negotiation and compromise, and open communication. As many other public scholars attest, these are ideals we work hard to achieve, although in practice they sometimes fall short.

When in a recent article in *Harvard Educational Review* Gerald Campano, et al. argue that given the increasing numbers of community-university partnerships, we must work to “make explicit and to consider with greater specificity the ethical dimensions of community-based research” (30), they are referring in particular to “contexts of cultural diversity, systemic inequity, and power asymmetry” (30). Through consensus, I was the project coordinator, and in that leadership role I navigated ethical and pragmatic decisions guided by scholarship in community-based research.⁴ I was comfortable to the degree possible that I was not “reproduc[ing] existing hierarchies of knowledge” (Campano, et al. 37), in large part because primary community partners Richard DeGroote and Jeffrey Palmer are accomplished professionals who know more than me about community organizations, Boys & Girls Clubs, assisting at-risk children, etc. Further, community-based participatory researchers Ellen M. Bastida et al. stress the necessity of equal access to and of voice, academics’ full disclosures about our own interests, and sharing leadership in different stages as needs arise.

As a social justice and multicultural educator, dealing with the “indigestible narrative” of minstrelsy as a scholar and teacher was challenging enough, but my personal roles as an Olivet Board member and volunteer, and my deep personal investment in the organization and its children, created further layers of ethical, intellectual, and emotional complexities. To what extent might these roles as educator and community member impact the decisions I made? Was I too personally invested? Or is my knowledge of and sincere commitment to the organization—and in particular, the children and youth it serves—a critical component of my efficacy as a community writing partner?

I have several, sometimes inconsistent, answers, and moving forward, I will further explore and consider my multiple roles within the context of an emerging scholarly conversation. Vidal, Nye, Walker, Manjarrez, and Romanik report that most of the community engagement initiatives of colleges and universities in their study began with “socially committed and strongly motivated faculty” who seek out community partners they do not know (2.1). In rhetoric and composition, David Coogan explains that his service learning project with the residents of Bronzeville, an impoverished neighborhood in Chicago, began because he perceived “a problem with the way we faculty and students represented the residents of Bronzeville to each other” (95). Randy Stoecker and Tryon note different ways these partnerships get started, including “blind dates” (97) and “chance encounters” (98), in much the same way compositionist Eli Goldblatt describes how Temple University’s Open Doors Collaborative began. He contacted Manuel Portillo, whom he’d heard about through his colleague, Steve Parks, and an organizer who also worked with him in another Philadelphia neighborhood (132). Deborah Mutnick, on the other hand, chose a site for a school-university, intergenerational, community project at the Brooklyn public school her son attended, noting her “dual role as parent and university professor” and her “own interests enabled a level of commitment and development that is difficult for college students to attain on their own at an off-campus location for a semester” (642). I am confident that my dedication to the organization likewise influenced my students in positive ways, but clearly it complicates how minstrelsy at Olivet is publicly remembered.

Legacies of Slavery, Higher Education, and Community Writing Partnerships

Appallingly, evidence abounds that “race relations in the U.S. [are] at a low point in recent history” (Myers), and institutions of higher education remain sites of these persistent and intractable divisions. Recent controversies at Harvard Law School, Yale University, and Princeton University involve potent reminders of the nation’s egregious history of racism and the stark realities of its continuing insidiousness. In fact, these memory markers—uncovered or still invisible—remain throughout the nation. But as James Horton points out, “it is embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning to consider the role that race and slavery played in shaping the national narrative. Any attempt to integrate these aspects of the national

past into the American memory risks provoking defensiveness, anger, and confrontation” (36). But confronting this shameful past is a moral obligation, as Linenthal powerfully claims: “Conscientious remembrance is more than a necessary expansion of the nation’s narrative. It is an act of moral engagement, a declaration that there are other American lives too long forgotten that count” (224). We must all “look at [sic] the tragedy of American history in the eye” and participate in this long but essential process to transcend, but never to forget or misremember, slavery and its legacies (qtd. in Linenthal 224).

In analyzing Yale University’s failures of memory, Blight looks forward, arguing that Yale “will want to take care to understand those historical moments in which memory decisions were made” (20–21). Surely, I continue to try to understand the very complex processes of this decision, including what I might have done differently, and how I will approach slavery, race, and other social justice issues in real-world and classroom contexts in the future. In particular, one reviewer of an earlier version of this article noted that in my attempts to facilitate collaborative decision-making and ethical remembrance of minstrelsy and blackface I failed to consult with any African American Olivet stakeholders. Kimberly also points this out in her essay. That is a mistake I regret and will not repeat. I think about it a lot in the cross-cultural community writing work in which I am currently engaged, confident that I won’t repeat that mistake, but also aware of the other potential and unpredictable perils and hurdles that may arise. Finally, I join my community writing colleagues who encourage the discipline of composition and rhetoric to pursue community writing partnerships despite the risks. Not only are these extraordinary learning opportunities for everyone involved, they are also, as Paula Mathieu writes, “vehicles for invoking a better future” (19).

Surely, I continue to try to understand the very complex processes of this decision, including what I might have done differently, and how I will approach slavery, race, and other social justice issues in real-world and classroom contexts in the future.

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Notes

1. Currently, the terms *collective memory*, *cultural memory*, and *social memory* are often, although not always, used interchangeably with *public memory*, although as Barbara A. Misztal observes, these uses are often contested.

2. DeGroote and Palmer are deeply invested in and committed to the Olivet organization and its mission to help children and youth. Palmer, an Olivet boy in 1965, retired in 2014 from his position as Olivet president and CEO, having worked in the organization for forty-two years. Palmer credits the organization for helping him to stay out of trouble while his working-class parents did not have the time or expertise to guide him. DeGroote has worked in various roles at Olivet for twenty-five years, most recently as a director of the 21st Century Program, affiliated with the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program that provides federal funding to establish community learning centers of academic, artistic, and cultural enrichment opportunities for children and youth primarily in underfunded, underperforming, high-poverty schools.

It was patently clear from the first planning meeting that both men take great pride in their work with the Olivet organization, see it as vitally important to positively impacting the region's most vulnerable children, and attribute the organization's continuing good work to the legacy of McCormick's character and generosity when he founded Boys Friendly Club in 1898. As DeGroote writes in his introduction to Book 1, "It was the vision of William McCormick to provide recreation, education and guidance programs to the boys of Reading. His story is one of civic engagement and helping the boys through some difficult times." Moreover, in his first presentation to students on February 20, 2014, DeGroote tells them their work will "pay homage to those who came before" in Olivet's history.

3. Overall, my approaches to community writing partnerships are aligned with the best practices endorsed by the most recent version of the WPA Outcomes Statement ranging from an emphasis on the rhetorical dimensions of writing to opportunities to address audiences beyond the classroom and to critical reading, thinking, and research. The Olivet public memory project also put into practice the very complexities of the writing process, enacting and exposing the fluidity of individual and collaborative writing, sharing in decision making with their peers, with me, and with our community partners. Furthermore, as stakeholders in "the rhetorical practice of remembering" (Enoch and Jack 518) the Olivet Boys & Girls Club, students were positioned as rhetorical agents with both authority and limitations.

4. In my experience, a coordinator is necessary given the many constituencies involved and the particularities of students working within the confines of a

semester calendar. For the community partners, this project was an “extra” part of the everyday workday of their jobs, whereas for me, it was integral to my professional work. Further, I oversaw the lengthy review, editing, and printing processes that involved multiple layers, constituencies, and complexities. All essays were fact-checked to the extent possible, all oral history narratives were approved by the narrators, and the manuscript was edited and proofread many times. Usually short-staffed, the partner organizations look to me for this leadership because of our different roles. Quite simply, neither community partner wanted the ultimate responsibility of the book we were to print and share.

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