

Constructing Public History in the Classroom: The 1968 Riots as a Case Study

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Abstract: When nontraditional undergraduates collected oral histories about the disturbances that followed Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, their deep Baltimore roots became an invaluable asset to the *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth* project. The racial diversity of the student body at the University of Baltimore allowed interviewers to capture a wide variety of viewpoints, and that breadth of perspectives became central to the researchers' understanding of the controversial topic. The assignment forced students to actively construct an interpretation of an event that other historians had ignored, revealing subjective complexities central to historical thinking.

Key words: Oral history, riots of 1968, nontraditional undergraduates, undergraduate history classroom, teaching controversial topics

ON APRIL 4, 2007 THE *BALTIMORE SUN* ran a front-page story headlined "Echoes of 1968: Baltimore's Riots Remembered; In a First, UB Students Document the Deadly Convulsion 39 Years Ago." The piece recounts the evening a reporter sat in on an oral history interview conducted at the University of Baltimore. He took notes as two UB history students questioned a family who had lost their home, business, and all of their belongings on April 7, 1968, after crowds looted and then firebombed their block in central Baltimore. The narrator, who had been a teenage girl at the time, choked

up as she recalled that day: “And that was the end of my life as I knew it,” she concluded.

This interview was one of more than one hundred that have been conducted by University of Baltimore students since the fall of 2006. The *Baltimore Sun*, National Public Radio’s *Tell Me More*, and local television and radio stations all reported not only on the anniversary of the urban unrest itself but also on the activities of UB students who brought the events onto a greater stage. The project attracted media attention in part because it involved students with deep roots in the community discovering the roles that their own friends and family members had played in historic events, but that dynamic is present in oral history projects in every community. Beyond the oral histories, UB’s examination of April 1968 created interest among Baltimoreans because the days of destruction, the motivations that led to them, and the results that lingered were still contested forty years later. Many people who had moved to the city in the last two decades or who had been born after the 1960s did not even know that our community, like more than one hundred other cities across the nation, had been affected by civil disturbances that took place after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Every day Baltimoreans passed empty lots that ringed the city’s core, or were forced to drive to the county to do their shopping because the city lacked department stores, big box retailers, or, in some neighborhoods, even supermarkets. Despite the evidence available throughout the city, most residents did not connect today’s empty lots to charred city blocks in 1968, or the present dearth of retail to the very real decisions every small business had to make forty years ago. Some families told stories of their individual experiences during the riots, but the Baltimore community had not developed a way of talking about the events that explained their causes or their consequences.

Hundreds of University of Baltimore students were essential in compiling and analyzing the documents that allowed us to launch this community conversation. When we at UB decided to commemorate the 40th anniversary of our city’s urban unrest, we gave ourselves more than two years to prepare, and that lead time allowed faculty members to incorporate the examination of *Baltimore ’68* into a surprisingly diverse collection of courses. In methods courses, survey courses, and a public history seminar, our students combed archives, talked to people who had experienced the events, and began to develop an understandable historical mosaic. Faculty used the work generated by UB undergraduates in summer workshops in the Teaching American History program organized by the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). As a result, classroom content about conditions in Baltimore in the spring of 1968 reached students ranging from kindergartners to graduate students. As a lecturer in history and community studies, I began the project marginally interested in the urban unrest, but as my students reported their findings, I became convinced that this controversial and understudied topic provided an ideal case study through which to lead students in the actual construction of history.

As we embarked on the examination, one of the first elements that became clear to the faculty and students was the lack of secondary sources addressing the 1968 disturbances in Baltimore or in any other city. One master's student at Morgan University had taken the riots as her thesis topic,¹ but an extensive search turned up no books, articles, or chapters on Baltimore in April of 1968. The discovery of uncharted territory is every historian's goal, but it proved unnerving for students who came to their history courses with stereotypical expectations: they thought they would read a processed account, memorize the salient facts, and regurgitate them on an exam. This case was different. One student lamented, "When you Google 'Baltimore riots 1968' nothing comes up!"² In addition, when they asked their professor to provide details about that time, I was unable to answer with authority. In this situation it became essential for UB students to engage in the very early stages of the historical process. They had not only to identify the documents that pertained to their topic, but in some cases, they had to create them. UB undergraduates became collectors of recollections that allowed them to begin to understand what had happened and what it meant to their community.

In the fall of 2006 approximately sixty upper-division students enrolled in my class "The New South and Civil Rights," a course without prerequisites that attracts both history majors and students from other disciplines. In past semesters the culmination of the course has been an oral history assignment dealing with the civil rights era in general. My objective for this assignment in previous years had been to get students into the field and talking to people who had lived the history that our texts analyzed. I regularly gave students a quick tutorial on interviewing techniques, including ways to write open-ended questions that would elicit complex and revealing answers. In my 2006 class I asked students to craft questions that focused on the unrest in Baltimore in 1968 and added another objective: students would collect stories to help all of us involved in the project understand the disturbances. The unrest had affected twelve commercial districts across Baltimore City. We wanted to know where Baltimoreans believed they had begun. Myths had circulated that outsiders were coming to Baltimore to incite violence. Had anyone actually seen cars with D.C. license plates roaming the city? Some families and business people remembered that they had not thought about moving to the suburbs, but the destruction caused them to leave. Were cause and effect really so clear cut? When students started asking questions like these, they began to define the study of history in a new way. Students generally come to a history class ready to analyze facts which have already been established by someone else. Through the oral history assignment that semester, students would play a part in the larger *Baltimore '68* effort as they talked to their community.

1. Medrika Law-Womack, "A City Afire: The Baltimore City Riot of 1968; Antecedents, Causes and Impact," M.A. Thesis, Morgan State University, 2005.

2. Brad Rosenkilde, comment made in UB course "Exploring the Past," Fall, 2007.

Our university is a commuter school, and our juniors and seniors are mostly transfer students well beyond the traditional college age. Most of them hold down jobs in addition to attending school, and they have strong local roots. In addition, UB is the most racially representative campus in all of Maryland. All of these qualities of our student body worked to our advantage with this oral history project. My students that semester were able to use their extensive social networks within the community to identify narrators who found themselves in many different situations in April 1968. From the beginning we emphasized that we were interested in the experiences of ordinary individuals; we would leave the politicians to our media partner WYPR, Baltimore's NPR affiliate. By winter break students had interviewed business owners, rent collectors, public interest lawyers, clergymen, young mothers, suburbanites, and media workers. They had collected stories, photographs, 1960s memorabilia, and leads to other potential narrators.³ One student who was enlisted in the National Guard interviewed one of her superiors who pointed her to *Into the Cauldron*, a paperback written by a Guardsman who had patrolled Baltimore's streets in April 1968.⁴ This title had eluded all of the professional historians and librarians, but the workplace connections of an undergraduate unearthed it. Significantly, some students were able to get people to admit that they had contributed to the mayhem. It is doubtful that narrators would have confessed to looting, receiving stolen property, or setting fires if an academic from the university had simply called them and asked them to participate. The students were able to appreciate that their ability not only to record details of the events but also to probe motivations and interpretations was adding to the value of the overall collection.

Class discussion of the various interpretations expressed in the interviews led to a richer understanding of the ways in which history is always a subjective exercise. In one of the first interviews, students asked an African-American minister about his experience of "the riots." He replied adamantly: "I would rather call that experience . . . or those experiences 'disturbances' rather than 'riots.'"⁵ Other narrators used the words "civil unrest,"⁶ "civil disorder," "in-

3. Working in teams of three, the students were required to transcribe the interviews, some of which had continued for hours. This step proved essential in the overall Baltimore '68 project because it allowed UB to post the interviews on an evolving Web site that provided the public face of the work the faculty and students were doing. The interview process caught the attention of Gadi Dechter, a reporter at the *Baltimore Sun*; his 2006 story generated more interest in the project, increased traffic to the Web site, and in turn, led us to many more narrators who wanted to be interviewed. With a grant from our provost's office and the promise of AmeriCorps stipends, we hired a team of two students to continue the interviews and transcriptions after the civil rights class had concluded. Using the most effective questions generated by the "New South" class, we compiled a list of questions that our interviewers asked every subject.

4. John J. Peterson, *Into the Cauldron* (Clinton, Md.: Clavier House, 1973)

5. Rev. Dr. Marion Bascom, interviewed by Jacqueline Spriggs, Katherine Lambert, Kerry Zaleski, November 4, 2006, Baltimore, Md. Transcript available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral.htm>.

6. William Costello, interviewed by John Schwallenberg, May 7, 2008, Towson, Md. Transcript available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral.htm>.

surrection,” and “civil disturbance,”⁷ “civil disobedience,”⁸ or “major confrontation.”⁹ As students and organizers of the project, we had to rethink our terminology. The steering committee had begun by referring to us as “The Baltimore Riots Project” or in shorthand “The Riots Project,” but the work the students did made us rename ourselves the more neutral “Baltimore ’68” using “Riots and Rebirth” as our optional subtitle. Our scholar in residence Peter Levy used “Holy Week Uprisings” to identify the events in Baltimore and elsewhere, and time will tell whether that coinage sticks. But as they examined the conflicting terminology, students could draw parallels to the choices that constantly face historians who attempt to label eras and events. What judgments are made when we in our survey courses teach “The Boston Massacre” and then weeks later “The Homestead Massacre”? Should the Bread Riots, Draft Riots, Tulsa Riots, Watts Riots, Newark Riots, and Baltimore Riots be considered the same type of events? Students could clearly see that their research was affecting the ways that people thought about 1968.

In the fall of 2007, students in another class took the oral history work one step further when they investigated each narrator’s testimony individually. In my methods course “Exploring the Past,” students discovered that although oral histories may prove invaluable in discovering ways that communities construct their own histories, the collection of statements contained in oral history collections do not prove infallible. The focus of this course is the identification of and proper citation for primary sources, and although the class is required for all history majors, many nonmajors take it as an elective. As a result, the class must accommodate a wide range of abilities. Each term I select a significant year from American history and assign each student the name of a person who was alive during that time.¹⁰ The individuals I use for this project are not well known, but they have left some traces in the historical record. Their relative obscurity forces students to expand their search terms to find documents that place the individuals in historical context. During our *Baltimore ’68* project, I selected the year 1968 and assigned each student one of the people who had provided an oral interview for our project. Students worked their way through the interviews, identifying streets, stores, schools,

7. Art Cohen discusses the use of these various terms. Art Cohen, interviewed by Nyasha Chikowore, September 20, 2007, Baltimore, Md. Transcript available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral.htm>

8. Bill Evitts, interviewed by Nyasha Chikowore, April 12, 2007, Baltimore, Md. Transcript available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral.htm>.

9. Father Thomas Donellan, interviewed by Jaime Nish, November 11, 2007, Baltimore, Md. Transcript available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/oral.htm>.

10. This assignment is my adaptation of a game developed by Theresa Mudrock, a history librarian at the University of Washington. “Engaging Students in the Game of Research,” *Perspectives*, December 2005. An online version is available through the American Historical Association at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2005/0512/0512tea1.cfm>. I was able to work with Tamara Smith at UB’s Langsdale Library to develop this assignment, and we teach this course together each year.

and restaurants, creating annotated transcripts as they went along. Trips to Langsdale Library's Special Collections and the Maryland Department at Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library allowed them to search the vertical files for pertinent newspaper clippings, find addresses in the Criss-Cross Directory, trace narratives on vintage maps, and locate photos of the pre- and post-riot Baltimore. Intrepid students visited other local archives and uncovered fascinating documents, including a constitution that a North Baltimore neighborhood ratified on the first day of the disturbances giving them the right to barricade their streets and defend them with firearms. Students also discovered that after forty years, memories sometimes fail. One narrator gave a vivid account of his father taking him to pay his respects to Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral train as it made its way to Washington. A student's research revealed that King's body had been taken from Memphis to Atlanta via airplane; there had been no funeral train. Perhaps the narrator had confused Robert Kennedy's train (which passed through Baltimore later that year) with the events surrounding King's assassination. This "mistake," however, reveals a great deal about the public's recollections of 1968, when unthinkable assassinations and tragic funerals followed each other in quick succession. In addition, this narrator emphasizes that his father took him to pay his respects to the slain civil rights leader. It must have been important to this white narrator to remember his father as someone who valued the contributions of people of races other than his own. This attitude was not always the case in Baltimore forty years ago, as many of the other interviews show. This story, while technically inaccurate, can educate students about the glimmers of racial understanding in their community's history, even in the midst of racial upheaval. Highlighting its subtle value indicates to students the careful readings that oral histories require.

Students in "Exploring the Past" produced scrapbooks and portfolios that were well researched and often professionally constructed.¹¹ Two students created digital scrapbooks, and their pieces became permanent parts of the *Baltimore '68* Web site.¹² We displayed the more traditional scrapbooks in what we called a memory room at the April 2008 conference. Attendees could thumb through the compilations and then record their own memories on digital recorders. Access to the scrapbooks was one of the most popular features of the weekend. Some older members of the community have asked class members to create scrapbooks depicting their own lives, and one student has gone on to compile several more as independent projects. The entire collection will be housed with the oral histories at UB's Langsdale Library. Here

11. Thanks go to Christina Ralls, community artist and graduate student at Maryland Institute College of Art, for introducing the class to the possibilities of scrapbooking.

12. Jaime Nish's digital movie of Father Donnellan's dramatic experiences during the riots is available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/donnellan.htm>. The interactive digital scrapbook Katherine Voss created of a young suburbanite's 1960s life is available at <http://web.mac.com/katherinevoss.iWeb/katherinevoss1/Welcome.html>.

again, undergraduates were able to see that their research and presentation skills were valued by their community and contributed to the university's overall project.

One weakness of the scrapbook project is the tendency to telescope the experiences of one individual without taking into account the larger historical picture. The steering committee faced that issue on a larger scale by our intense focus on Baltimore, when dozens of other American cities suffered similar disturbances during the same period. Students in a public history seminar provided context to the Baltimore situation when they created as a class project a commemorative calendar of the events of 1968. Deborah Weiner of the Maryland Jewish Museum taught the course at UB as an adjunct and created the assignment at the urging of the steering committee. The calendar, which is now available to the public on the *Baltimore '68* Web site,¹³ incorporated images, clips, and factoids and allowed students and the general public to contextualize our local events.

First year-students at UB were able to put the events into an even wider time frame when they enrolled in a learning community entitled *Baltimore '68*.¹⁴ This seminar linked three general education classes: "Modern America," "Urban Solutions," and "Oral Communication," all taught by different professors. These three courses covered requirements, but they did so with urban unrest as an organizing principle. The history course highlighted economic and race riots in our nation's past; the urban studies course took a comparative angle by examining Newark, New Jersey and its response to 1967 riots; and students developed their communication skills by delivering speeches pertaining to the content in the other two classes. Students followed the driving tour the steering committee had developed and attended the three-day *Baltimore '68* conference in April. Although most of the freshmen were Baltimore natives, many had never heard of the 1968 events. Most had enrolled in this particular learning community in order to better understand the current state of their inner city neighborhoods.

One way to remedy this ignorance about 1968 among this younger generation is to imbed a discussion of it into the secondary school curriculum. The U.S. Department of Education's Teaching American History program offered us precisely that opportunity. In a three-year series of workshops, elementary and high school teachers from the public school systems in Maryland's various counties come to UMBC's Center for History Education each summer for professional development. The program pairs university professors with secondary master teachers. Three UB professors on the *Baltimore '68* steering committee work at the Center as historians during the summers. In the summer of 2007 all three incorporated a *Baltimore '68* assignment into

13. Available at <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/intro.htm>.

14. The 2007–2008 school year introduced freshmen back to the UB campus for the first time in decades. This group of students was for the most part more traditionally aged than the older UB upperclassmen described above.

their syllabi, and as a result dozens of public school teachers discovered the growing Web site and the ample resources it held for their classes. Teachers in the high school workshop created lesson plans using the oral histories from UB, the Maryland Historical Society and the Maryland State Archives. Teachers in the high school program used lessons about the Baltimore disturbances to meet the national standards that require history students to “evaluate the continuing grievances of racial and ethnic minorities and their recurrent reference to the nation’s charter documents” and in doing so “explain historical continuity and change.” The teachers in this workshop took different approaches to the topic, some concentrating on the military aspect, others looking at political causes and consequences, some looking at the experiences of women or children and one stepping back and examining the way high school teachers should approach controversial topics in the classroom in general. They presented their teaching units at UB’s April conference and were delighted that they drew a big audience.¹⁵

This panel of public school teachers brought the educational aspects of the *Baltimore ’68* project full circle. One audience member was Father Thomas Donellan, a retired priest who had walked the streets of West Baltimore in April 1968 trying to keep destruction to a minimum. Forty years later he had given us an oral testimony, attended the mosaic workshops, come to the conference for all three days; in short, he had been as involved in our work as anyone else from the community. After Father Donnellan heard the teachers describe their lesson plans, he declared that their session was the most important and inspirational piece of the entire project. He believed that every school child in Maryland should learn about the disturbances and the conditions that led to them. When they saw large empty tracts of land in the middle of their neighborhoods or were forced to drive to the county to make purchases because retail had abandoned the city, they deserved an explanation that included all of the elements of their community’s history, even those aspects their textbooks and elders had omitted. This man, who had experienced the disturbances and the decades of urban decline in their aftermath, knew that the most important aspect of the project was the way it led to a new public understanding of the history of our city. In addition, project organizers hope that the project has led our students to a new understanding of what the study of history should be. As students at all levels of the educational system explored this controversial topic, they learned that history is not a closed book but an active process: there are always new questions to answer and new perspectives to pursue. The construction of our community’s understanding of the events of 1968 is not complete, but the examination of the difficult topic, the inclusion of a variety of voices, and the willingness to

15. The panel’s success at Baltimore ’68 led to opportunities to disseminate their lesson plans to Baltimore County teachers during their professional development in-service days before the fall 2008 semester began and an invitation to the Association of Independent Maryland Schools Forum in October 2008.

collect and grapple with the ambiguities of various “truths” and “facts” moves us and our students closer finding to a viable place where the rebuilding can begin.

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