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Negotiating Community Literacy Practice: Public Memory Work and the Boston Marathon Bombing Digital Archive

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Abstract

This study examines *Our Marathon* <http://marathon.neu.edu>, which is a digital historiography website created in response to the bombings at the finish line of the Boston Marathon on April 15th, 2013. As a participatory archive, *Our Marathon* is an example of community literacy practice. I explore the construction of community through the public memory work of the archive by examining two collections of archival artifacts: public submissions and the Boston City Archives content. This examination reveals the complexity of community construction, but also the influence of *Our Marathon* as a material support for the work of public memory. Highlighting the archive's negotiation between an intimate space for community participation in the wake of trauma, and its role as an open, digital archive with global reach, I demonstrate that tensions of this negotiation are useful to highlight the power of the archive as a location of public memory construction, and can suggest ways *Our Marathon* and other digital historiographic projects can better foster community participation and formation through the reflexive collection, preservation, and display of archival content.
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1. Introduction

On April 15, 2013, as I worked at my desk on a typical Monday afternoon in Chicago, I received a strange text message from my partner in Boston. The text read, "We are ok." Though at first I had no idea what she meant, after a quick Google search it was clear that she was referring to the bombings at the Boston Marathon. She had been watching the race onsite earlier in the day, but returned to her apartment before the bombings took place. Just before 3pm, two bombs detonated by brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. The blasts killed three spectators and injured 264 runners and spectators (Kotz, 2013, para. 1). The violence continued three days later on April 18th when MIT police officer Sean Collier was murdered in his cruiser by the Tsarnaev brothers (Bidgood, 2013, para. 6). During police pursuit, wherein Tamerlan Tsarnaev was killed, much of the Boston metropolitan area was put on lockdown. In the days that followed as memorials continued to be constructed and fundraising events took place, the focus shifted to the victims and the aftermath. My own geographically distant

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experience of the events was mediated by online news and social media, but my experience was also constituted by my personal connection to Boston.

As a local event, the bombing profoundly affected lives—killing and injuring spectators, runners, and police officers, as well as damaging businesses. A now-famous picture of volunteer Carlos Arredondo helping other first responders transport survivor Jeff Bauman attests to the bravery and courage of those on the ground in the aftermath. But the full repercussions of the attacks were not constrained by geography. As an international event, covered extensively in the news media, the bombing affected a global community of runners, spectators, Bostonians who live beyond the city limits, and those with connections to the city too myriad to name. In images of the aftermath on Boylston, the international flags lining the debris-strewn final stretch of the marathon provide a stark visual representation of the global scope of the marathon and this attack. The connections to national security and terrorism brought President Obama and Vice-President Joe Biden to Boston and the surrounding towns to speak in the immediate aftermath. These speeches underscored the importance of Boston as a cultural hub of education and research where people from all over the world come to study, remaining forever connected to the city as part of a "Boston diaspora" ("Obama's remarks," 2013), para. 8.

Our Marathon: The Boston Bombing Digital Archive <http://marathon.neu.edu> was launched by an interdisciplinary group of faculty and graduate students at Northeastern University directly following the Boston Marathon bombings. The archive aims to extend beyond the media coverage of the bombings and their aftermath to "allow a wider range of important stories about these events to be told and shared ... and for us to understand the event in its broad, community-wide dimensions" ("About," n.d., para. 3). By inviting these stories, *Our Marathon* asks users to help "mend and strengthen the fabric of our community" ("About," n.d., para. 1). My personal connection to the Boston community and Boston Marathon has become more immediate as I am now a Boston resident and worked as a member of the *Our Marathon* project team during the summer of 2014. This study explores *Our Marathon* as a location of community literacy practice to determine what, exactly, constitutes the community implicit in the name, *Our Marathon*. How is community defined, extended, and circumscribed in this participatory digital archive with global reach?

I discuss two distinct collections of archival items in *Our Marathon*: public submissions that consist of items submitted through the public-facing contribution page, and the Boston City Archives (BCA) collection, made up of digital copies of letters sent to the city of Boston in the wake of the bombings. An analysis of the literacy practices of these two collections through the lens of public memory reveals the fluid and complex notion of community constructed by the archival items. Further, a focus on the archive as both a material support for the construction of community and a mode of communication itself reveals a tension in the collection, preservation, and display of archival content. This tension arises, I argue, through the archive's negotiation of its role as both open participatory archive and potential site of inquiry for future researchers. Through this analysis, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital spaces can both encourage and constrain diverse community literacy practices, and point to implications for future builders and curators of digital historiographic projects, especially community projects. To that end, I conclude by offering some suggestions for planning and maintaining future projects.

2. Participatory archives and public memory

Wells (2002), in her influential "Claiming the Archive for Rhetoric and Composition," defined *resistance*, *freedom*, and *possibility* as the major "gifts" of archival research methodologies for rhetoric and composition as a field (pp. 56–59). These gifts point to a focus on disciplinary legitimation within rhetoric and composition, but can also be read as highlighting the political focus of the field—resistance (to dominant narratives), freedom (from the resentment of having narratives imposed upon us), and possibility (for social action through research). With large-scale digitization of archival artifacts and the growing use of digital technology to build and maintain archives and scholarly editions, rhetoric and composition has begun to take stock of these gifts for digital archives and historiographic projects. In 2013, a special issue of *College English* showcased affordances of digital technology in historiographic projects, including archival projects, that have advocated for marginalized groups (Cushman, 2013), sought to recover literacy scenes and rhetors obscured by the archive (Carter & Dent, 2013; Graban, 2013), and engaged community stakeholders in research (Cushman, 2013; Ridolfo, 2013). In many ways, this special issue underscored that the *digital* of digital historiography does not change the type of work produced in rhetoric and composition, but it does create new opportunities of scale, reach, and participation (Enoch & Gold, 2013). What is relevant here are the unique affordances of a specific type of digital historiography—participatory archives.

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