

Memorializing & Reimagining Resistance  
United States of America  
Swarthmore College  
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### Section 1: Narrative

The Memorializing and Reimagining Resistance (MRR) Program is a two-part popular political education program for youth of color from Bushwick, a historically Black and Latinx working-class neighborhood in the Northern Brooklyn region of New York City. MRR aimed to combat gentrification in Bushwick through cultural construction and preservation projects spearheaded by local youth. We partnered with Educated Little Monsters (ELM), a Bushwick-based organization that offers free performing and visual arts programming for youth, and Sen Floyd, a renowned Brooklyn-born-and-raised documentarian and photographer who runs Sen Floyd Productions LLC.

The MRR Program was rooted in emancipatory peace-building theory and blended history and the arts. MRR encouraged nine students between the ages of nine and eighteen to take the role of emerging youth Cultural Scholars, a title based on the 2018 article “Cultural Worker, Not A “Creative” of writer and artist Devyn Springer, to critically engage with their community’s history. Cultural Scholars, as described to MRR’s students, “use their artistic and intellectual work to resist the systems that harm them and their community.” Our Cultural Scholars participated in two back-to-back online courses titled *Digitized Community Archive* and *Capturing Resistance* where they explored 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City history, community archiving practices, and socially engaged art. Using this knowledge, they laid the foundation for a living digital community archive that preserves Bushwick’s history and completed a street photography project that captured their community’s rich cultural patrimony. The Program culminated in a socially distanced exhibition titled *Revelations of Resistance* which was attended by 30 community members, and the launch of the Bushwick Archive which is currently showcased on Instagram (@bushwickarchive).

Bushwick is my home. My experiential knowledge and pre-established intimate relationships in the area defined my vision for the program. I identified gentrification as a detrimental process that was causing interpersonal and structural conflict. Thus, I proposed MRR as a response to the emotional and social harm inflicted on long-time Bushwick residents by the ongoing aggressive process of gentrification. Furthermore, I applied an emancipatory peacebuilding model because it aligned with local anti-gentrification organizing efforts. Emancipatory peacebuilding posits that peace is catalyzed by local actors and informed by a community’s specific needs, knowledge, and desires. Grassroots organizations such as Mi Casa Resiste, Mayday Space, and Educated Little Monsters were postulating demands directly shaped by our people’s lived experiences, not by the experiences of powerful parties outside of our community. Drawing on these observations, I wanted to make sure that MRR served as a continuity of the self-determination and self-definition principles set forth by Bushwick grassroots leadership.

Nonetheless, MRR took a methodological approach that aligned with my passion for history and socially engaged art. Gentrification erases histories, so to resist gentrification in Bushwick is to preserve our urban patrimony. One way to do this is by building an archive, the foundation of all

historical construction. Long-time Bushwick residents, however, cannot simply be subjects of a history told by others but must rather be the producers and theorists of their own history. MRR sought to achieve this by incorporating relevant local history lessons and community-led archiving practices into the *Digitized Community Archive* course curriculum. By the end, our Cultural Scholars understood the conflicts that's plagued their community—such as housing insecurity, vast unemployment, suburbanization, and police violence—during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the grassroots efforts orchestrated to resist these issues. By the end, our students were equipped with the historical knowledge to counteract the distorted portrayals of Bushwick put forth by media in the past four decades and take control of their community's historical narrative by launching the Bushwick Archive.

Socially engaged art was an equally important part of MRR. Socially engaged art is a mission-specific, yet versatile genre of art. It responds to issues that affect a given community and is produced by parties directly affected by said issue. Nonetheless, it can take all forms of art. In the context of MRR, photography was our chosen medium. Our *Capturing Resistance* course integrated socially engaged art to encourage our Cultural Scholars to engage in an artistic exercise of self-determination and self-definition, and to pay homage to Bushwick's history and art tradition. Our students were asked to create a short photography series of street subjects that symbolized resistance and connected Bushwick's past to the present. This assignment asked them to define what resistance means to them, reflect on what practices of resistance they value most, and determine how they will continue to resist issues that affect them in the future. Our Cultural Scholars were also invited to make clear connections between the past and present to see history as a living phenomenon that they have a role in creating. Based on these guided questions and themes, they identified the subjects they wanted to photograph. By the end of our *Capturing Resistance* class, they produced powerful photographs that captured murals, community gardens, and graffiti to showcase how Bushwick continues drawing on past resistance efforts to combat gentrification and other detrimental social conditions.

Overall, through archiving and socially engaged art practices, Bushwick youth resisted gentrification by partaking in the preservation and construction of their neighborhood's living history. Collectively, they refused to let Bushwick's diverse working-class urban patrimony be disappeared.

## Section 2: Personal Statement

Leading the MRR Program was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. I'm incredibly grateful for the Swarthmore Foundation for giving me the opportunity to develop my vision despite the uncertainty and difficulties brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

MRR highlighted the importance of community, resistance, and political education. Initially, I was only counting on my history lessons to convey this, but the events of the present played an unexpected role in further reasserting my message. Our curriculum emphasized the power and resilience of our community to overcome unsurmountable challenges in the past. These history lessons became even more stark in 2020. Mutual aid and solidarity lifted Bushwick in the post-World War II eras following massive urban deindustrialization, urban "renewal," white flight, and detrimental neoliberal policies. Those same practices of resistance have continued to keep Bushwick afloat during the pandemic. The continuities of our history made it easy for our Cultural Scholars to connect the past and present.

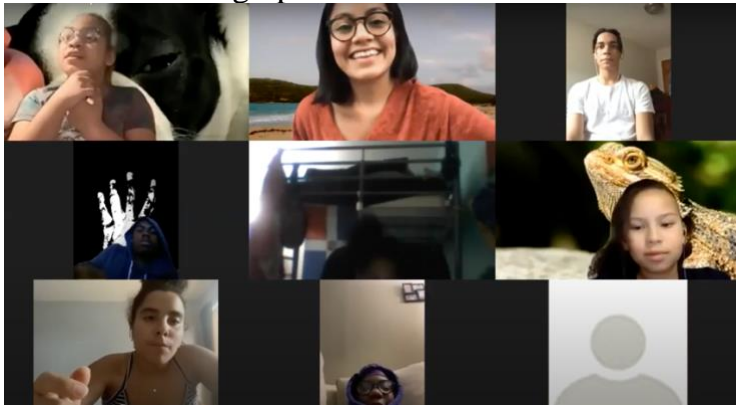
Furthermore, the summer protests against police violence and calls for defunding the police also had an unexpected impact on the MRR program. My students, despite some being very young, understood the rationale and significance of the protests. Many had participated in them or had family and friends participate. They were curious and impatient to learn more about the history of urban policing and race in New York City. During our lessons on white flight, redlining, 1990s protests against policing violence, and gentrification, they constantly expressed frustration towards the public school education they received for neglecting to teach them about these topics which they deemed important.

Nonetheless, MRR's Cultural Scholars were inspired and energized to continue the traditions of their community. As the program came to an end, I asked my students to reflect on the most powerful lessons of our class. Our youngest Cultural Scholar, Eva of 9-years old, mentioned that she learned that "Bushwick will always resist and you've got to be silly to not see that coming." Tommy, a high school senior, declared, "I've come to better understand the environment we currently live in and learn how people of color can resist." The MRR Program enriched his perspective on Bushwick and pushed him to reflect on the ways his community defined his identity, interests, and passions. Tommy is now certain that he wants to be a filmmaker who narrates stories that showcase urban activism and resistance.

It was heartwarming and rewarding to witness my students' political consciousness evolve. Despite the challenges we collectively faced as we tried to complete the program in the middle of a pandemic and amid the painful backdrop of racial injustices, MRR's Cultural Scholars managed to grow empowered to stand up for what they believe in and continue their community's tradition of resistance.

"Youth from underrepresented communities are capable of defining and determining their present and future. It is our responsibility to encourage them to manifest control of their narratives and equip them with the knowledge and resources to take an active role in defining their community's living history. The Memorializing and Reimagining Resistance Program—founded on the emancipatory practices of local leadership and shaped entirely by community members with experiential knowledge—serves as a powerful and necessary space to do just that."

### Section 3: Photographs



August 13, 2020. A glimpse of one of our Thursday evening summer classes on Zoom. We had class twice a week. My students, unsurprisingly, did not enjoy weekend classes as much.



October 17, 2020. This is the photography wall of our pop-up socially distanced exhibition. The curatorship behind this exhibition was based on Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism*. The wall reflects a selection of the collective photography series our Cultural Scholars produced showcasing resistance in our community.



Left: October 17, 2020. Junior, one of our Cultural Scholars, showcases his Certificate of Completion which was awarded to him during the exhibition. He shared that one of his favorite parts of the program was that it felt like "a second family."



Right: October 17, 2020. Tommy, one of our Cultural Scholars, alongside his mother at the exhibition. They were posing in front of one of his photographs.