Rebuilding Shattered Worlds

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Rebuilding Shattered Worlds
Anthropology of Contemporary North America

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Ethnographic research is possible only through the generosity of others, and because this study spanned nearly ten years, a large number of people are owed our deepest gratitude. From the community members suggesting research topics and meeting with us at length, to the student participants signing up for a class, to the college administrators and colleagues who supported the project with funding and by approving new courses: we are grateful for people’s enthusiastic engagement with us across so many years of research.

We first acknowledge community members who provided early direction, including Jane Moyer of the Northampton Historical Society, who met us on many occasions; and Deacon Anthony Koury from Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, who introduced us to key former neighborhood residents. Reverend Sue Ruggles of the St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church masterminded the initial Taylor School reunion and shared with us address lists that allowed us to reach beyond Lebanese neighbors to a wider world of former neighbors. St. John’s hosted our reunions and student scanning and interview sessions for years, and Pastor Ruggles often greeted our participants with words of welcome. Patsy Woodson and Norma Rosner worked behind the scenes, setting aside the vital meeting space. Barbara Kowitz of the Sigal Museum helped us find funding and hosted two large end-of-the-year parties for students, participants, and the wider community.

Our project never would have taken the direction it did had it not been for George Bright, then associate athletic director at Lafayette College; his grandfather plays an important role in the story told here. An Easton native, George knew potential speakers well and handpicked, it seemed to us later, the very best interlocutors we could imagine. This
project would have been very different had George not been willing to meet with us, at length, that fateful day in 2010.

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An early version of chapter 4 was presented at the panel “Strategies and Performances of Temporal Heteroglossia,” co-organized by Jacqueline Messing and Andrea Smith and held at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. We thank Jacqui and fellow panelists Evelyn Dean-Olmsted, Aurora Donzelli, Adam Harr, Sarah Hill-ewaert, Marco Jacquemet, Patricia Lange, Kathe Managan, Julia McKinney, Ashley Stinnett, and Camilla Vasquez for their engaging and insightful comments. This presentation was preceded by an earlier version presented at the panel “Voices Inside Voices Inside Voices: Interpreting Multivocality,” organized at the 2012 Oral History Association annual
meeting by Henry Greenspan. We thank Hank and fellow panelists Susan Clemens-Bruder, Amy Kesselman, and Judy Ridner for their suggestions.

From Andrea:

I first recognize the many talented students who worked on different facets of this project since its inception. Eduardo Sanchez and James Sommers undertook independent studies with me that led downtown, and Marvin Snipes, Amy Spooner, and Rachel Scarpato carried out pilot projects as a Mellon-funded “Community of Scholars” in 2006–7. Rachel Scarpato worked on this full-time in the summer of 2007, and I will never forget how much fun we had sleuthing in city archives. She conducted expert interviews with many of the early consultants, and is thus partly responsible for the project’s initial direction. Together we wrote the article “The Languages of Blight,” on which chapter 2 is based. Kelsey Boyd, Walter Burkat, Emily Mulford, and Molly Leech were exemplary research assistants. Whole classes of students in my research methods seminar, A&S 244, carried out further interviews, culminating in a community-directed, student-authored book of neighborhood memories that students presented to their consultants at the end of the term. Finally, this book would never have been written without the amazing partnership with Anna, who stayed with the project for all four years of college while developing her own interests and during the first grueling years of graduate school. John Meier, of the Provost’s Office, was always able to find ways to continue funding student research through the Lafayette Excel Scholars Program.

Several of the images are due to the efforts of Eric Luhrs, digital librarian at Lafayette’s Skillman Library. He supported the creation of a digital map of the neighborhood, which involved lengthy scanning sessions carried out expertly by Paul Miller, also of the library. Amy Abruzzi first suggested this digital component. Diane Shaw of Skillman Library Special Collections helped us find sources. The maps are courtesy of our library’s GIS and cartography whiz, John Clark, and illustrations drawn by Kristin Leader.

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course, and Dan Bauer’s “tech clinics” provided me with a model of just how that might work. Alison Alexy’s students in her research methods class collected early transcripts. Rebecca Kissane, herself a housing policy expert, suggested sources early on regarding urban renewal, and Caroline Lee took the time to provide comments on early drafts and suggested ways it could become a project about memory.

Finally, I thank my family for being there throughout.

From Anna:

Professor Smith’s wonderful mentorship has defined my ability to contribute to this project, as well as my broader introduction to anthropology. As our writing and thinking continued beyond our shared time at Lafayette, and into my time at the University of Virginia, Ira Bashkow provided incisive comments on various drafts, as well as his consistent support. I thank members of the uva Linguistic Anthropology Seminar in the fall of 2013 for feedback on an early version of what is now chapter 4. Many of the ideas in chapter 5 first began to develop during Adria LaViolette’s course, Archaeology of Everyday Life, that same semester. And thanks to Nathan Hedges and Arsalan Khan for helpful conversations. My family, too, has been part of this project all along by way of constant encouragement.
Terminology and Transcription Conventions

Much of this book concerns a former way of speaking. Our speakers use many different and sometimes old-fashioned-sounding ethnic labels when describing each other or the neighborhood, for example, “Syrian” for Lebanese immigrants and “Afro-American” for black people, a practice we discuss at length in the chapters that follow. “Syrian Town” is used as a place-name even though it is a misnomer: the people about whom we write are Lebanese. Throughout the text, we continue to use our speakers’ archaic terms, introducing them with quotation marks at first. The reader should keep this in mind and imagine quotation marks throughout the text. Where we do use quotation marks subsequently, it is to indicate particular instances of usage.

This work includes extensive excerpts from audiotaped interviews. We use the following transcription conventions:

. . .  pause in speech
— sudden break in speech, usually to indicate that the speaker has changed topic midsentence
word  speaker’s emphasis
word  authors’ emphasis
[ ] information provided by the authors
Rebuilding Shattered Worlds
1. Ethnography of the Expelled

In a small city in eastern Pennsylvania, elderly men and women have been gathering to talk about the past. Ostensibly planned as elementary school reunions, these meetings allow participants to recollect a whole neighborhood. We have been following this activity since 2007; this book is the result of this inquiry.

What makes this reunion activity especially intriguing is the fact that the neighborhood these men and women are so keen to discuss is completely gone: it was obliterated during 1960s urban renewal projects. Many of the eighty- and ninety-year-olds meeting up in the dingy basement social hall are encountering each other for the first time since they were “scattered” by the demolitions. Now, a half-century after wrecking balls “took the heart out of the city,” as one speaker puts it, they are reuniting to reminisce about the past. What is prompting them to meet, to meet here, and to meet now?

This is a study of memory and place, of place-loss and recovery. The effects of midcentury urban renewal on minority communities and urban landscapes are well documented in studies focusing on the nation’s largest cities, such as Chicago, Boston, and Detroit. Less examined have been the smaller cities, which also took advantage of generous federal funds to remove so-called blighted landscapes. This ethnographic study, conducted a half-century after renewal struck Easton, Pennsylvania, explores the ways a demolished neighborhood continues to reverberate in the imaginations of its former residents. This neighborhood, once known locally as “Syrian Town,” was densely packed and inhabited by Lebanese Americans, Italian Americans, and African Americans, among others, and was noteworthy for its unusually integrated nature. Our book follows neighborhood reunions and the intersecting languages of blight,