

Living History and the CUNY Digital History Archive: A Teaching Artifact

I recently came across an article in the *New Yorker* titled [“The Race to Collect COVID Ephemera Before It’s History,”](#) detailing an emerging COVID-19 archive created by the New York Historical Society’s “History Responds Initiative.” The initiative has so far archived materials such as homemade masks, hand sanitizer bottles, photographs from the summer’s Black Lives Matter protests, vaccine cards. The Initiative’s reflects the strong impulse to “documen[t] history as it is happening.” My students have also expressed to me a similar feeling over the past year, saying that they feel like they are living through history; I’ve felt this too. There’s a sense of the enormity of the pandemic and a daily understanding of how it will continue to restructure everyday life. There is also a pull to reflect on the pandemic from the future; to put this year behind us as history, even while we are living it.

As a first year writing teacher, I have wondered how I can further activate this feeling of a living history to enliven my students’ ongoing connections to other moments in the past. How can a lived history inspire us to write about the past as not an inert fact or series of events, but a story that was and is still lived and, therefore, still unfolding?

As these questions prompted me to think of the relationship between historiography and storytelling, last spring I created an assignment for my first-year writing class at Baruch College that asks students to reflect on their connection to the history of CUNY, particularly to the years surrounding the student led protests that resulted in Open Admissions in 1970. As a project that complements and is a follow-up to [an assignment I co-created with Daisy Atterbury](#) in 2019 that used the [CUNY Lost and Found Archives](#), this assignment engages the [CUNY Digital History Archive](#), a free and public archive that spans CUNY’s history. In this project, students choose and research one artifact from the Open Admissions period at CUNY and compose a story of the artifact as it is connected to their experience as students in the present. As history is so much more than a retelling of “what happened,” this assignment prompts students to consider archives as always incomplete; students see how the artifacts take on new meaning as they create emergent stories and connections.

I offer the following assignment as a resource for any teacher interested in teaching archival research skills, particularly while we don’t have physical access to CUNY’s libraries. The assignment asks all of us working at CUNY—teachers as well as students-- to consider our connections to the student demands created by Black and Puerto Rican student activists in the 1960s to the present day demands of the [Free CUNY](#) movement, many of which are created in response to the pandemic. Taking on the role of the historian and archivist, students in my class asks the pertinent questions of how we position ourselves in the midst of still unfolding

histories of the public university and, moreover, explore how their voices are critical to telling and also shaping the history of the lived present.

Digital History Archive (DHA) Assignment

For this research project, we will continue to explore the student protests and campus-wide strikes that ultimately led to open admissions at CUNY in 1970. Rather than write a more formal research paper, this is a more creative assignment that will involve original archival research and engagement with the public CUNY Digital History Archive (DHA).

You will notice that the DHA has wonderful pages that introduce each [time period](#), yet the archival materials themselves only have a few sentences that are more descriptive rather than reflective or analytical. So for this assignment, this is an opportunity for our class to contribute to this evolving archive by having each of you write an accompanying “page” that will go along with your chosen artifacts.

The prompt:

I would like you to choose **one** primary object/artifact from the “[1961-1969 The Creation of CUNY - Open Admissions Struggle](#)” time period of the DHA, and write a **4 page** accompanying reflective essay that responds to the following prompt:

Why do you think people today should pay attention to your chosen artifact?

Your essay should demonstrate an understanding of the artifact’s significance in relation to:

- 1) the fight for Open Admissions
- 2) to your experience as a student at CUNY in the present.

Who are you writing for?

Your audience is anybody who comes to browse the contents of the Digital History Archive. Imagine you are writing for a student, scholar, parent, administrator who is interested in CUNY’s history as a public institution and who wants to know more about the history of student activism and the story of open admissions. At this point, there is no writing from students on the DHA’s website (at least, none that I have found), so this is a chance to open up this already amazing archive to student historians.

Breaking the research process down into steps:

- 1) You will begin by learning as much as you can about the object you choose from the DHA.
 - a) For instance, if you choose an oral history report: who is the person speaking? What was their relationship to Open Admissions? *What is significant about this object in relation to our present moment?*
 - b) Perhaps there's not a lot to find out about that particular person, so maybe you want to talk about why oral histories, including the one you chose, are important for understanding this history. In other words, if you feel stuck or unable to find a lot on a particular person, you could think about the significance of the form of the artifact--what is interesting about the use of oral histories to tell a story of the past? Perhaps the form of a poster featuring student art is something you want to explore.
- 2) Then you will contextualize your understanding of this object's significance by putting the artifact in conversation with **two additional primary sources**, and **at least one peer-reviewed secondary source=total of 4 sources. Your other sources can come from other online archives such as the [NYTimes](#) or [Interference Archive](#).**
- 3) Finally, I encourage you all to speak to your own experience as students at CUNY to express the significance of your chosen artifact. How do you connect the significance of this artifact to your experience of CUNY's shutdown during the pandemic? What connections do you see between the movement for Open Admissions led by CUNY's Black and Puerto Rican students and protest movements today such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Free CUNY movement?

Do I need citations?

The most important part of research is documenting a conversation that unfolds between you and your sources. Citing your sources not only helps you keep track of where your information comes from, but also is useful for your future readers who may consult your works cited page for their own research purposes. So for this assignment, I would like us to continue using in-text MLA citations and creating a Works Cited page at the end of the essay.

Schedule for Completing Assignment:

1. Choose DHA artifact and write why it interests you. What is your initial impressions of this artifact. What do you notice?
 - a. For teachers: I like to offer at least two sessions to guide students through how to navigate the Digital History Archive and other archives they might use.
2. Write Three Research Questions based on your chosen artifacts
3. Use your three research questions to guide your further research. You will submit an Annotated Bibliography consisting of three entries: three primary sources (including your main artifact), one secondary. You will include a few sentences for each source on how it helps you answer your research questions.
4. First draft: 3 pages + Writer's Note
5. Final draft, 4 pages + Works Cited page + Writer's Note

