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# Flattening Hierarchies in a Round World: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's "Youth Historians in Harlem (Part 2 of 2)"

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## Education's Histories

methodological grist for the  
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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Goldenberg, Barry M. "Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars (Part 1 of 2)." *Education's Histories*, March 6, 2015. <http://www.educationshistories.org/youth-historians-in-harlem-exploring-the-possibilities-in-collaborative-history-research-between-local-youth-and-scholars-part-1/>.

## Flattening Hierarchies in a Round World: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's "Youth Historians in Harlem (Part 2 of 2)"

**Michael Bowman**

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*Editors' note: We sent Goldenberg's original essay to Bowman for peer review. Bowman's original review was shared with Goldenberg, who subsequently revised his essay. In turn, Bowman has updated his review to reflect changes from the original to the revised essay and to incorporate the responses from Jack Dougherty's first multilogue response. Rather than bury this behind-the-scenes exchange between the author and a reviewer, we share it to reveal more about the process of creating scholarship within the community of educational historians.*

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Barry Goldenberg followed his introductory installment about the Youth Historians in Harlem (YHH) project with an examination of his experience teaching oral history methodology and conducting oral history interviews alongside youth. The introductory article framed the work by asserting—correctly, I think—that there remain “untapped synergies among historians of education, historical research, and local youth.”<sup>1</sup> The second article began to explore those synergies by illuminating the process of the co-collection of oral histories by scholars and high school students.

Like Jack Dougherty, reading Goldenberg's essay immediately took me back to my own teaching experience. Between 2003-2005, fellow educators from Wing Luke Elementary School and staff from the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, led bands of curious fourth graders up and down Seattle's

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Jackson Street and into early 20th century buildings that held stories of trans-Pacific labor migrations, Chinese benevolent associations, Japanese ten-cent stores, and interracial jazz clubs and dance halls. Armed with dog-eared copies of Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place*, we attempted to bring to the forefront the social and cultural histories—the working landscapes—of a street and area that our students traversed on a regular basis.<sup>2</sup> While our students interviewed shopkeepers, jazz musicians, and long-time residents (with, ironically, funding from The History Channel), Goldenberg's oral history project was a much more structured affair. In Goldenberg's words, equipping high school students with “institutional disciplinary training” gave them the credibility and credentials—it “authorized” them—to produce historical knowledge for a wide audience.

This language of ‘authorization’ gave me pause, but Jack Dougherty's multilogue response fairly critiques this notion of authorization in a ‘digital age.’<sup>3</sup> In my brief multilogue response, I focus on two overarching questions—one political-pedagogical and the other ethical—that arose for me while reading Goldenberg's second installment.

<sup>2</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Dougherty. “Sharing Authority and Agency: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's ‘Youth Historians in Harlem,’ Part 2 of 2.” *Education's Histories*, September 22, 2015. <http://www.educationshistories.org/sharing-authority-and-agency/>.



## First Question: What Does the Doing of History Do?

During the last two decades, social studies scholars have extolled the ‘doing of history’ in American primary and secondary classrooms. Instead of a traditional textbook and recitation approach, these scholars have pushed a pedagogy of active historical construction by promoting teacher-student archival research, primary source analysis, oral histories, and trips into the field.<sup>4</sup> These scholars focus their attention on how the ‘doing of history’ positively impacts student subject matter engagement, student learning, and (less frequently) student civic engagement. Goldenberg’s essay prompted me to think about how the ‘doing of oral history’ with youth can also serve as a formal space for the building and/or strengthening of an intergenerational and place-based political consciousness. That is, ‘doing oral history’ can benefit both youth and elders; can prompt recollections of the past *and* renew a place-based consciousness in the present. Goldenberg hints at this as an outcome of the YHH project; but there are places where his analysis seems so intent on validating the claim about historical authorization that he misses potential cases of the building of place-based political consciousness.

For example, Goldenberg notes that during one of the oral history interviews, an elder made “eye contact almost exclusively with the youth” even though Goldenberg himself asked the questions. He chooses to analyze this as a case of an elder recognizing that “the youth were also co-experts,” meaning, presumably, that the elder recognized that the youth had been schooled in disciplinary oral history methods and that the youth were to be the ones that would ultimately write and produce the historical scholarship on Harlem Prep. Maybe. But might it also be the case that the elder saw this as an opportunity to tell the younger generation about the racial and educational politics of Harlem in the late 1960s and the 1970s in order to make connections with students’ potential political activism in the present? Might it be that the elder understood that Harlem—the Harlem of Harlem Prep—as under threat by recent urban and educational policies that have produced gentrification, displacement, and racial tensions in the neighborhood? Might it be that the elder chose not to look at a white representative of Columbia University precisely because of that University’s role in the current gentrification of West Harlem? I’m not saying that this was the case, but without a more robust inclusion of the voices of participants, it seems as likely as the explanation offered by Goldenberg.

To be fair, Goldenberg rightly discusses positionality as an important dimension of oral history methodology. He finds “something deeper and more ethereal” when oral histories are shared amongst people who possess common memberships. With respect to the YHH project, he claims that the elders’ stories were likely more

<sup>4</sup> This scholarship is vast, but perhaps the best known works remain: Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); James Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009); James Percoco, *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998).

“personal” and more “intimate” than if they were told just to him: “a white researcher—and outsider—who grew up in suburban St. Louis.” This very well could be true, but is not necessarily so.

Positionality statements such as Goldenberg’s are important acknowledgements of the ethical nature of any kind of research that relies upon interpersonal relationships, orality, and other people’s stories. Yet, one’s position is never absolutely fixed and one might actually use research methods to move away from the position of ‘outsider’ to a position on the margin of ‘outsider-insider.’ As sociologist Paul Hodkinson has argued, scholars initially on the outside “may have to work harder over a longer period of time in order to gain the levels of trust” needed to ethically pursue their research, but such hard work brings them closer to the inside in the eyes of research participants.<sup>5</sup> I believe the same is true of historians. After reading Goldenberg’s essay, we might be tempted to ask: is the inclusion of students in oral history research a means of moving these students from the outside to the inside of historical scholarship? Or, is the inclusion of students in oral history research a means of moving historians closer to the inside of the histories of Harlem Prep?

<sup>5</sup> Paul Hodkinson, “‘Insider Research’ in the Study of Youth Cultures,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 137.

## Second Question: Who Ultimately Benefits From the Flattening of the Hierarchies of Historical Production?

I am reminded here of the story of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, as told in Benjamin Looker’s wonderful new book *A Nation of Neighborhoods*. Originally a project of the Smithsonian Institution, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum became a powerful symbol in the early 1970s of community-based historical research methods and neighborhood preservation campaigns. From this neighborhood museum came publications and exhibitions that “highlight[ed] the dignity and institution building of a community of working class African Americans” and “[a]long the way, honored elderly residents who were asked to contribute their memories and their keepsakes.”<sup>6</sup> Such a flattened hierarchy of historical production proved short-lived, however, as the museum attempted to appeal to a broader audience and as staff became increasingly professionalized. By the late 1980s, it had transitioned from a street corner neighborhood museum to a Smithsonian branch-museum at a “secluded site” miles away.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Looker, *A Nation of Neighborhoods: Imagining Cities, Communities, and Democracy in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 195.

In the context of the YHH project, the story of the Anacostia is important as a historical antecedent and as a cautionary tale. Calls for flattened hierarchies by institutional actors can be powerful. They can support the

‘doing of history’ amongst youth and elders; the formal sharing and recordings of memories formerly told only around the kitchen table; and the flourishing of contemporary place-making efforts. But institutional actors can also have broader audiences in mind and often have to toggle between hierarchies established by funders, universities, academic publications, etc. So, while I echo Goldenberg’s hope that historians of education can forge ‘new’ relationships with youth in order to produce new place-based histories of youth, I also would argue that we must always be cognizant of our *institutional* positionality. If we are committed to flattened hierarchies of knowledge production, we must also always include the voices of youth in our work and we must always involve participants in determining how and where our joint-work is disseminated.

With this in mind, I look forward to reading the third installment of Goldenberg’s essay, where readers will see how Goldenberg and youth both tell the stories of Harlem Prep.



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*Education’s Histories would like to thank Michael Bowman for his careful review of Barry Goldenberg’s essay, “[Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars \(Part 2 of 2\)](#)” and for allowing us to publish his review in our experimental multilogue format. If you would like to experiment with the multilogue format, please contact [Education’s Histories](#) to respond to a published essay.*

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Adrea Lawrence & Sara Clark, co-curators

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