

Ali Smith:

Thank you so much Michelle. And up next, we have our final presenter of this panel before we'll open up to ideas, and thinking about 2020 and all of the opportunities and challenges presented by all three platforms. We're really excited to be hosting RJ Rammy [sp?] today of Plain Talk History. It's actually totally fortuitous that he's joining us today for the symposium for his, Michelle can't keep track of the number of symposiums she's been to and RJ we just met while we were, Ted and I were up at the National Council of Public History in Hartford, Connecticut. And we were so impressed with your energy and all that you're bringing to a really creative platform and so we're really excited to be viewing your site and thinking about how it can be incorporated in digital collaboration going forward. So welcome, RJ.

[audience applause]

RJ:

And how much time do we have left, should I rush through? I'm happy to do that too.

Ali:

Let's keep it to ten minutes.

RJ:

Okay. I will try. I am so excited to be here and I'm also so nervous because there's a lot of people here. I told Bianca this, but it's especially nerve-racking when you know that the audience is really smart, so I will try not to mess up. My name is RJ. I run a design studio in San Francisco. I'm a technologist and a creative designer. I only talk about big ideas, as Ally knows, I don't do subtle. So today my big idea for the group is that "You have permission to tell difficult history." And, in fact, you didn't need my permission, you always had it. And that's because the public is ready for it. No actually the public is really hungry for it. And I hope in the next ten minutes I can convince you of that.

So in all of two months ago, I launched a new project which is not my studio's project, this is a project for all of us to guide a different way of telling history. And I'm calling it Plain Talk History. This is what it looks like. It's a very easy url, plaintalkhistory.com. There's a lot of introductory text right now but essentially you get down to an imaginary list of lessons about American history that I wish will be completed someday in the distant future. There's only two that are actual lessons right now. But you can imagine things like "How did the kingdom of Hawai'i become a state?" And I just want

to post out it works on your cell phone. It's actually very important to me that everything on this website will be accessible on a cellphone, so in fact you can look at it right now and if you are texting your friend I will just think you're really excited about my project.

[audience laughter]

RJ:

I have a board of advisors that I spent most of this year assembling just to start. I hope to expand in the future. And for now it's hosted by my studio. It's on a server. It doesn't cost a ton of money to run open source software. In fact, it runs on Wordpress. To be a little geeky right now, one on Wordpress and technically there's a little piece that runs on Omeka which are both open source, which means I don't pay anything for it and never will pay anything for it. But it's kind of agnostic about how we build it. So one of the lessons coming is actually another Wordpress site because it's going to be a way to interact with different archival materials that have been digitized so you can read and highlight from the primary sources. Another lesson is just customized Javascript and it's a little bit cinematic but it's just web browser stuff. And the next one could be whatever. It could be based on History Pin, it could be based on Your Story, Our Story. The point is really to be a directory of really high quality history. So, let's take a look at one of them. To show you what I meant about typical history. This is Mr. Monroe Work, who worked in Tuskegee, Alabama in the early nineteen hundreds. And what is this lesson about? Which you can barely read, but it is a lesson on all the known U.S. lynchings of people of color in the United States for a high school audience. And essentially, it's not original research, but it takes original archival material, which had been assembled by an archivist in Tuskegee, Alabama and puts in on a digital map, puts it in a digital platform which is what we've created.

Taking very briefly to the exhibit, but I do, there's a number of empathetic moments this lesson plan that in fact anticipates that it will be difficult, it may be difficult for white audiences who are not aware of it. It will certainly be difficult for people who have been subject to the structural racism of our country. So I always do want to pause for a moment that I'm about to talk, there's not going to be anything graphic or disturbing to look at but these ideas are in fact disturbing, and I don't need to tell anybody in this room that history is very powerful. I've given this talk before and people have had emotional reactions so if you feel upset, or you need to leave the room, or you want to punch me in the face, I completely understand and I do ponder that. For example, people can explore the map and this is the Great Salt

Lake, as you can see on the left side and the line that you can see through it is the Transcontinental Railroad. But if people zoom in here you can learn about the Rock Springs Massacre in 1885. Mr. Bah and seventy-eight of his coworkers had their houses destroyed when they were attacked for breaking a strike of the Union Pacific Coal Department and he and twenty-seven of his comrades were killed. Here jumping to California, the great state of California, here in Truckee, California as many people know of the Truckee method of expulsion of Chinese communities. A fire had broken out, mysteriously had broken out in the Chinatown and good people of the world rushed to get some water in and try to put it out and the town fathers decided that there was no way enough water from the river was going to save Chinatown. So instead they arranged for the train car to roll in between Chinatown and the river to protect the rest of the city from burning.

To jump to yet another place in the country, and different color victims, but the same kind of thing. This is the Porvenir Massacre in Texas where a group of young men and Union boys were rounded up and murdered due to some of the tensions with the Anglo ranchers on the border. And then finally the mainstream narrative of lynching is African Americans in the South. And this is one piece of, and you know Alabama is highlighted just for context, this is just one piece of the South. For about seventy-five years of violence in the American South. But the lesson isn't about only the dark part, in fact, it is framed around Monroe Work, my hero, who was an archivist, or actually he was a sociologist but he ended up documenting the names of all these people. And the reason we have the names for our map today is because you can suspect he knew what he was doing which he was preserving this for a time when people would recognize what happened.

But you also meet the other heroes, certainly in dark times there are people who are doing great things. So you can meet Ida Wells, you can meet Mary Turner, learned a little bit about them and the work they were doing to stop this atrocity. You learn about Wing Hing v. Eureka, which is the foundation of case law in the United States for the idea of reparations that if you destroy our property you must repair it, you must offer reparations. So literally the root of reparations law comes from this case. And in finding, if you go to an exhibit, well I just punched you in the face with a lot of dark history, but it calls on the reader to reflect on this and discuss it. In fact, one of the suggestions is that, reach out to two people that you know and ask them what they think. The idea here is to engage with this history. So far it had the fortune of being picked up by, it's a bit of a hot topic in today's political climate so it did get picked up by the Smithsonian Magazine and the Huffington Post which generated a bit of traffic. So it was prowled at 136

hundred people who I'm sure did not wake up that morning to talk about racial violence, found themselves engaging with racial violence that day. And finally, I just wanted to share with you some, I did not solicit input on my project, in fact I was afraid it was all going to be hate mail, but what I did do was lurk on social media to see what people were saying about my project. And I have literally hundreds of these screenshots of what people were saying, but I'll share just a few of them. And many of them are from white audiences.

"Wow, powerful, disturbing, yeah we had some dark history. This is almost too much to process."

"Oh it looks like my county was on there. I was not aware." That's actually a very common reaction that people had: I just didn't know. This isn't my mother but this was sort of her reaction, "Oh my god, I had no idea." To see them all on the map was kind of a blow.

Again, "I had no idea that four Italians, an Asian American, and a Native American were lynched in Mississippi" And they are posting pictures of the map, social media is now filled with pictures of people acknowledging the violence of white supremacy. I particularly like this one, it says, "I see you California." And that's referring to the fact that California had at least as many lynchings as Arkansas. You know, we think of it as a liberal state but it certainly, people tried very hard to make it a place only for white folks for a long long time.

And then again, some just deeply thoughtful things. "This is why Black Lives Matter." "There should be a plaque at every one of these sites. We must live with our history." And again, none of this was prompted. These are just random people from the public who don't protect their Facebook feed.

[audience laughter]

RJ:

I am going to skip through another one, and in conclusion, I will leave you with epigram: "To we all must remember that students can't really learn what until a State Board approves it." Oh heck no. Every student has a phone that gives them access to the entire universe of information. So I'm not willing to wait until the State Board, I think the state of Texas just last fall said it is okay to talk about slavery being the cause of the Civil War.

We're not going to wait around for them to get around to the 1882 Exclusion Act. So again, you have permission to tell these histories.

[audience applause]