

# Resurrecting Rosewood: New Heritage as Applied Visual Anthropology

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#### Introduction

In this chapter I explore how new heritage intersects painful pasts. Scholars of difficult heritage and sites "representing painful and/or shameful episodes in a national or local community's history" (Logan and Reeves 2009, 1) continue to seek new methods for producing meaningful engagements while simultaneously supporting the goals of social justice. *New heritage* refers to the use of new media to document, analyze, and interpret cultural heritage (Kalay et al., 2008) by drawing upon the study of new media, or the "translation of all existing media into numerical data accessible through computers" (Manovich 2001, 20). This includes the translation of analog materials into digital formats as well as the creation of fully digital artifacts like 3D models. This chapter's case study is drawn from nearly a decade of ongoing research into the tragic history of Rosewood, Florida, a primarily African American town destroyed during a weeklong episode of violence commonly referred to as the 1923 Rosewood Race Riot.

My journey to embracing new heritage grew out a mix of concerns and experiences. I have been a long-time user of geographic information systems (GIS), and experiences with GIS and archaeology (González-Tennant 2009, 2011) encouraged me to think about the various ways researchers could represent the spatial aspects of heritage. In addition, my dissertation committee at the University of Florida alerted me to ways scholars can participate in positive social transformation. Peter Schmidt's

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work among the Buhaya in Tanzania (2006, 2010) linked representation, cultural memory, and community empowerment, while James Davidson's work questioned the uncritical ways historical archaeologists interpret the lives of others (2004, 2007, 2008). Faye Harrison (1997, 1998, 2005, 2008) pushed me to recognize my own positionality as a transformative step towards decolonizing anthropology, while marilyn thomas-houston (2005) supported my exploration of creative, visual methods for sharing scholarship and Paul Ortiz (2005) challenged me to question the public intellectual potentials of my research. As a PhD student at the University of Florida, the methodological focus of my earlier training supported a growing engagement with social justice. As an assistant professor, I endeavor to use new heritage and engaged pedagogy (Freire 1970, 2002; hooks 1994, 2003, 2010) to impart a similar experience to each of my students.

## New Heritage and the Contemporary Past

There is relatively little use of new heritage for researching, interpreting, and representing the recent past (Harrison and Schofield 2010, 249–281). The majority of previous work, typically referred to as virtual archaeology (Reilly 1990), examines the use of virtual technologies to represent archaeological contexts (Forte 1997). A small group of archaeologists recently have been exploring the interactive potentials of virtual world environments, calling this approach cyber-archaeology (Forte 2010, 10). Cyber-archaeologists believe online worlds have "the potential to provide insights into the ways in which the notions of heritage are transforming in the early twenty-first century" (Harrison 2009, 16). These scholars focus on the ways people use such technologies to explore historical topics. For instance, Morgan (2009) used the online world of Second Life to create digital reconstructions of archaeological work at Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic site in modern-day Turkey. These online worlds allow visitors to experience archaeological work undertaken by the University of California, Berkeley. Unfortunately, this project was discontinued in 2011 because of budgetary constraints associated with maintaining a presence in Second Life. New heritage embraces these approaches, and yet it remains a distinctive practice by combining perspectives and methodologies from a range of disciplines (e.g., historical archaeology, oral history, visual anthropology). This approach also supports the use of digital technologies to further the goals of collaboration and social justice (González-Tennant 2013). While most virtual archaeology focuses on monumental and prehistoric contexts, exciting examples of the use of these technologies for reconstructing and exploring the recent past do exist. This includes the virtual reconstruction of a mid-twentieth-century African-American neighborhood in West Oakland, California, and a video game allowing users to interact with non-player characters (NPCs) to explore the site's local history (Kalay and Grabowicz 2007). A similar project explores serious gaming to reconstruct the urban environment associated with the 1976 displacement of a black community in Soweto, South Africa (Nieves 2009). These projects harness new heritage to investigate difficult pasts while supporting sensitive engagements with multiple publics. My work in Rosewood, Florida, similarly uses new heritage to investigate the history of African-American disenfranchisement by translating academic research into publicly accessible knowledge.

### Case Study: The Rosewood Heritage Project

In this section I provide a brief overview of the 1923 Rosewood Race Riot and my methods for researching and sharing the town's history. The primary reason I embrace this approach is that it allows me to share heritage research with a wide audience. These formats include virtual world environments, online worlds like Second Life, and digital storytelling videos. These various formats are likely to engage a broad range of society. For instance, younger visitors are more likely to explore the virtual world environment, while older audiences may engage with the research through more traditional formats such as video. My research combines these formats to share the history of Rosewood with as large an audience as possible.

#### Development and Demise of Rosewood

The former site of Rosewood is nine miles from the Gulf of Mexico in Levy County, Florida (Figure 10.1). Rosewood was settled in the mid-nineteenth century by a diverse group of people. By the early twentieth century, Rosewood was majority black and Sumner was a company town with a mix of black and white workers. Then, on New Year's Day 1923, a white woman in Sumner fabricated a black assailant to hide her extramarital affair with a white man. A white mob quickly formed and headed for Rosewood. They first encountered

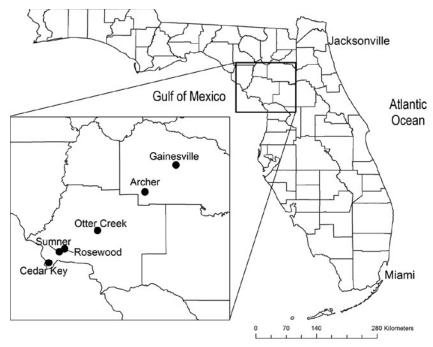


FIGURE 10.1: Location of Rosewood, Florida (source: author)

the home of Sam Carter, a long-time black resident of Rosewood, and proceeded to interrogate him by hanging him from a tree by the neck; then, when it seemed the mob might release him, a man leveled his gun at Carter's face, and New Year's Day ended with the sound of a shotgun blast.

At first, it seemed that the violence would end with Carter's murder. However, more than two days later, whites in Sumner heard that the black assailant had returned to Rosewood with local resident Sylvester Carrier. Before the night was out, at least two whites lay dead on his doorstep after attempting to set his house on fire, with his family still inside. Rumor and hatred spread quickly through rural Florida, eventually reaching the Klu Klux Klan in Gainesville, only 40 miles away. Residents of Rosewood knew the response for killing whites would be swift and violent; black men armed themselves and headed into the woods, and women and children hid with one of Rosewood's only white residents, John Wright, to wait out the violence. However, by January 6, three other blacks had been brutally murdered and the white mob, now numbering in the hundreds, began the systematic burning of Rosewood. During this time a train was brought through town at four in the

morning to pick up the women and children, who had moved to the swamps and spent the previous couple of nights hiding after John Wright was unable to guarantee their safety. The train took dozens of families to towns such as Otter Creek, Archer, and Gainesville's black district, where descendants live to this day. On Sunday January 7, 1923 the mob returned to Rosewood and burned every remaining African American building (Figure 10.2).

Residents of Rosewood—those who survived long enough—would have to wait for more than seven decades to receive any trace of justice. Though a grand jury convened in January 1923, no convictions were made, and the jury's records have since been lost. Rosewood lingered at the edges of collective memory for decades. Then, in a 1994 landmark decision, the State of Florida decided to pay compensation to survivors and descendants (D'Orso 1996; Jones et al. 1993).

#### New Heritage in Rosewood

My work in Rosewood centers on the use of three technologies. The first involves the use of GIS to reconstruct historic property boundaries because no historic maps or city directories exist for the town. I meticulously analyzed and reconstructed the metes and bounds information from hundreds of historic property deeds to reconstruct historic parcels using ESRI's ArcGIS software. The resulting Historic Properties GIS (HP-GIS) shows property ownership and transfers between Rosewood residents for 50 years (1870–1930). I added U.S. Census data to determine additional aspects of each property owner's identity. In addition to supporting a deeper contextualization of Rosewood's community, this GIS work provides a spatial template of Rosewood as it existed prior to the events of 1923. Archaeological research has been undertaken at several properties to successful verify the HP-GIS's ability to accurately predict the location of past structures on the landscape.

The second technology used in my research draws on this spatial template to reconstruct a virtual world environment of Rosewood. Virtual world environments allow users to interactively explore virtual content. The first step in creating a virtual Rosewood begins with the creation of several dozen 3D models representing historic structures. The appearance of these structures is based on oral history accounts, property descriptions, and the documentation of extant historic structures. These individual structures were initially created with Autodesk's 3DS Max, which is freely available to educators and students. These 3D models are then placed in a virtual world environment created with the Unity3D game engine. The public can access the virtual world environment (Figure 10.3) at the Rosewood Heritage Project website (www.rosewood-heritage.net), which I maintain on a private server.

I also explored the use of Second Life (www.secondlife.com), an online world created by users but maintained by a private corporation. I initially used Second Life to create a Virtual Rosewood Museum. The virtual museum allows visitors to experience the site in a number of ways. The museum itself takes the form of a repurposed home where visitors can explore the history of Rosewood. In a second, modern-looking building visitors can view a 25-minute digital documentary about Rosewood. A smaller structure represents the home of an African American family next to a timeline of the 1923 riot itself. Unfortunately, the cost of maintaining a presence in Second Life is prohibitive. The Virtual Rosewood Museum was discontinued in 2014 after more than four years of operation. At present, a replacement virtual museum is being created using Unity3D. A complete discussion of my use of Second Life is available elsewhere (González-Tennant 2013, 68–77).

The third technology used to share the history of Rosewood with a wider audience is digital storytelling. The use of digital technologies to share personal histories traces its roots to a series of workshops held in Los Angeles during the early 1990s. These workshops proved so successful that the Center for Digital Storytelling soon launched a series of national workshops exploring the topic (Lambert 2009, 1–10). While the majority of digital stories last around 10 minutes or less, my use of digital storytelling resulted in a 26- minute digital documentary created in consultation with Rosewood's descendant community. A significant portion of the documentary provides a glimpse into the lives of survivors. A particularly touching moment in the documentary occurs when Robie Mortin, who was eight years old in 1923, describes meeting her father for the first time several months after the riot. Mortin's father recognized early on how the early attacks on Rosewood residents might turn into large-scale violence, and sent Robie to nearby Williston with her sister. After hearing about the destruction of Rosewood, and not being able to meet their father, the girls found work as migrant farmworkers and made their way to Riviera Beach, Florida. Mortin shares what happened one morning when she went to a newly constructed church months after moving to Riviera Beach:

There was a ditch that separated Riviera Beach from Kelsey City, there was a long ditch there. There had a bridge across it, and of course all the milk houses were there, and the Hearst Chapel AME Church there.



FIGURE 10.3: View of Rosewood Virtual World Environment available via the Rosewood Heritage Project website (source: author)

They had built that church right on that side of the ditch. So, we went to church, and would you believe our daddy was there, and we didn't know where he was, we didn't know where he was, hadn't seen him in months. We walked into the church that Sunday, and there was our father (Robie Mortin, video of interview with author, 2009).

The ability of digital storytelling to share emotionally touching moments like these with a wide audience represents an important point for heritage workers interested in creating collaborative and engaging projects. The viewer feels Robie Mortin's words—delivered in her soft, 94-year-old voice—in an unmistakable, visceral way. The emotional impact of her brief story demonstrates the trials and happy surprises that make a life scarred by trauma bearable.

## Difficult Heritage, Collaboration, and Visual Technologies

The history of Rosewood and the traumatic experiences of its African-American community is one example illustrating the darker elements of modernity. Like the Holocaust and Apartheid, the American system of racial inequality forces us to question "key tenets of the project of modernity such as progress, rationality, science, technology, industrialization and liberal democracy" (Lennon and Foley 2000, 21). These sites and histories often inspire intense discomfort. Grappling with this "dissonant heritage" (Tunbridge and Asworth 1996) is becoming increasingly central to heritage and tourism studies. The growth of "dark tourism" (Seaton 2002; Sharpley 2005; Stone 2006; Tarlow 2005) forces us to question the growing attraction of concentration camps, shantytowns, and other locations of racial violence as tourist destinations. Sites like Rosewood can contribute to broad conversations about the nature of intolerance and hatred. This requires the recovery of hidden histories, what Sharon Macdonald refers to as "memory interventions" designed to "challenge forgetting in the public sphere" (2009, 94). The Holocaust and South African Apartheid are internationally recognized events, but more local histories are often neglected through various amnesiac practices. Macdonald's work specifically addresses public forgetting in regards to local sites related to the Holocaust (Macdonald 2008). Similar memory interventions are needed in America. As a nation, we easily misrepresent racial intolerance as a thing of the past and view racism in the present as a self-correcting practice. It is not, of course.

Finding sites that successfully confront past trauma while encouraging critical reflection produces mixed results. Lennon and Foley (2000:21) believe the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance (MOT) successfully supports critical reflection by combining survivor testimonies and visual displays with a rigid tour schedule designed to impart a sense of the rational planning at the heart of the Holocaust. Wendy Brown's (2006) ethnographic engagement with the MOT provides a powerful counterpoint. Her analysis better represents the museum's imposing architecture, overly structured tours, and the deep ambivalence produced by a stupefying array of media. The MOT's "extensive trafficking in stereotypes and clichés" (Brown 2006, 120) depoliticizes its pro-Zionist agenda, naturalizes history, and collapses complex categories of identity (e.g., race, religion, nationality) into a struggle between good and evil. Dark tourism sites must strive to balance the legacy of social inequality with eliciting strong feelings of anxiety. If successful, these sites encourage thoughtful tourists to confront the legacy of modernity. New heritage provides a powerful suite of tools for exactly this type of work.

My exploration of new heritage is not designed to subject visitors to "sensory and emotional overload" while simultaneously delivering "an intense moral-political didactism" (Brown 2006, 125). The Rosewood Heritage Project creates a personal engagement with the history of the town

as a meaningful place with a long and complex history. The virtual world environment promotes individual exploration, and the virtual museum is available for group exploration. The digital documentary avoids stereotyping Rosewood as simply a site of death and tragedy by collapsing the town's history into a single event. This is a complaint descendants have of John Singleton's film Rosewood. My use of new media deviates in many ways from locations where multimedia exhibitions engulf the visitor's mind, where "power and history make little or no appearance in representations or accounts of ethnicized hostility or conflict" (Brown 2006, 109). The Rosewood Heritage Project combines various forms of new media to explore the complex history of minority disenfranchisement with a thorough contextualization of Rosewood's history, as both a location and a community, past and present.

Research into Rosewood's past has benefited from the use of new heritage in numerous ways. In addition to providing new information regarding the town's development and the lives of descendants, these technologies create new opportunities for collaboration with descendants and current property owners. After the events of 1923, no African Americans returned to the area, and the property passed through various hands until the approximately few dozen current landowners came to own the properties. Most of these property owners purchased their properties within the last generation or so, and few have deep roots in Levy County or family ties to the events of 1923. I reached out to numerous property owners in various ways (e.g., letters, word-of-mouth, phone calls) in the five years prior to the launch of the Rosewood Heritage Project website. Few responded to these traditional attempts at communication. Some were not interested in having Rosewood commemorated, while others chose to remain silent because of previously negative experiences with other researchers. This latter group included the current owner of Rosewood's African-American cemetery, which is no longer in use. This landowner saw a feature story on the project in the St. Petersburg Times in 2011. He visited the project's website, explored the (thenpreliminary) virtual world environment, and viewed the digital documentary. Afterwards, he reached out to me and, citing the website's honest depiction of the project's goals, invited me to assist him in preserving the cemetery (Figure 10.4).

Gaining access to this property was important for the future of my research. From a scholarly standpoint, cemeteries act as central locations anchoring memory to place. In addition, this particular landowner is much respected by his neighbors. The 2012 cemetery documentation supports the next stage of research. I am working closely with this landowner to find a steward for the



FIGURE 10.4: Documenting Rosewood's African American Cemetery in 2012 (source: author)

cemetery. We are contacting heritage preservation agencies and groups to purchase and care for the site. The friendly engagement with this landowner is expanding my network of collaborators to include additional landowners and previously unknown descendants. This in turn supports the creation of an active oral history program and collection of additional historical documents (e.g., photographs) from family archives in Levy County and elsewhere.

New heritage represents a suite of technologies useful for engaged heritage work. Collaborative work in Rosewood faces unique challenges because of the range of experiences associated with the site's history and ongoing commemoration. Scholars interested in working with non-academic groups typically find themselves challenged to explore new theoretical and methodological terrain. Applied visual approaches (Pink 2006) often require a period of experimentation on the part of the researcher. I am continually excited and renewed by this aspect of new heritage. However, this type of work does not easily map onto traditional modes of scholarship, which focus upon concentrating expertise in academic hands and then distributing research through tightly controlled hierarchical networks of knowledge production (e.g., university classrooms, peer-reviewed publications).

The decision to embrace participatory visual research directly speaks to issues of power and ethics. For instance, a major benefit of digital storytelling over traditional film/documentary making is cost. Modern media, such as filmmaking, follows an industrial logic (i.e., large-scale production studies, expensive equipment costs, necessity of labors), whereas new media provides a postindustrial method that is not regulated by mass standardization (Manovich 2001, 29-30). This aspect of new media means its potential as an emancipatory form is literally hardwired into its very structure. Approximately half of the digital documentary created for this project is composed of interviews with two survivors. The focus on personal narrative central to digital storytelling allows me to focus the narrative and research on the experiences of survivors, and specifically on the ways survivors coped with the destruction of their town in the intervening decades between 1923 and the early twenty-first century. My decision to embrace new heritage was motivated by the descendants. When I began this research in 2005 I expected to develop a traditional archaeological project, complete with large-scale excavations. However, my growing network of collaborators felt this would add little to their understanding of Rosewood. This is a common sentiment among African-American communities "because they have never seen themselves reflected in the makeup of the practitioners or in those being served by the outcome of the research agendas" common to archaeology (Battle-Baptiste 2011, 70). I reexamined my own research agenda and dedicated time to learning and applying the various digital technologies at the heart of new heritage. This approach has revealed new information about Rosewood's past, expanded my network of collaborators, provided unexpected research opportunities, and promoted a growing public dialogue on Rosewood in Levy County, Florida, and beyond.

#### Conclusion

This chapter discusses the use of new heritage for investigating racial violence in twentieth-century America. New heritage represents a mixed-methods approach combining various digital technologies. A central tenet of heritage is the idea that the past and present are mutually constitutive, and that we need to investigate the complex ways the present uses the past (Lowenthal 1985). Rosewood remained at the edges of public memory for decades, until reporters and scholars began to retrieve this history in the 1980s and 1990s. New heritage offers a way for researchers to communicate their results with a broader public. The memory interventions (Macdonald 2008, 2009) this supports represent an act of translation. In using these technologies I seek to translate academic research into enriched public knowledge. This centers on promoting an honest engagement with Rosewood. The Rosewood Heritage Project includes a complete virtual world environment, details on accessing the Virtual Museum (currently being moved to the Rosewood Heritage website as part of a National Endowment of the Humanities–funded grant), the digital documentary, and a data warehouse containing some of the same information I used for my study (e.g., census records, oral history transcriptions). The Internet allows me to provide access to my data for use by the public and other researchers alike.

New heritage is not a panacea. Simply constructing a virtual world environment or hosting a virtual museum in Second Life is not enough to contribute to the goals of social justice. An ethnographic engagement is required to realize the full potentials of these technologies. I return to Levy County and the area around Rosewood once or twice a year. This is necessary to renew my network of collaborators. I am currently working closely with libraries and historical societies in Levy County—especially the Cedar Key Library and Cedar Key Historical Society—to maintain an active oral history program. The history of Rosewood is painful and continues to elicit discomfort from many residents of Levy County and the rest of Florida. My approach to new heritage, combined with an ongoing ethnographic engagement making use of oral history, helps convince residents that my intentions are not to denigrate one ethnically/racially defined group. As one recent attendee to my public talk at the Cedar Key library remarked, I am "not interested in pointing fingers at whites."

In addition to the need for an ongoing ethnographic engagement, new heritage technologies are constantly evolving. This includes new versions of programs to construct 3D models and new ways of representing the past. As such, for scholars to make effective use of these technologies, the period of experimentation is not going to end. I am currently remodeling the 3D assets (e.g., historic structures) with open source software such as Blender (www .blender.org). These programs allow me to create assets in nonproprietary formats and explore more cost-effective techniques for new heritage. Ultimately, it does not matter which technology is used to bring the past to life. If the goal is to engage the public in meaningful and ethnical reflection, then an engaged, ethnographic focus must remain an integrated part of any new heritage project.

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