I am Michelle Dalmau, a Librarian at Indiana University Bloomington and Co-Director of the Institute for Digital Arts & Humanities along with Dr. Kalani Craig, who is also a Clinical Professor in the History department. I am presenting today with Maks Szostalo, until recently, IDAH’s Senior Digital Methods Specialist.

In partnership with IU’s Center for Research on Race & Ethnicity in Society, and with significant contributions from Dr. Craig’s students, we have been organizing a range of history harvests at IU Bloomington and around the state of Indiana. Given the complexity of community-based archiving, our center drew on principles of minimal computing, with respect to people and tech, to help us build the necessary relationships and workflows for equitable, flexible, replicable, and ultimately, successful history harvest.
In 2010, historians William Thomas and Patrick Jones from University of Nebraska-Lincoln, introduced the History Harvest as a way to bring digital history into the classroom with an emphasis on the public humanities.

By digitizing artifacts owned by communities who are often hidden or erased from the dominant historical narrative and contextualizing these artifacts with oral histories, the History Harvest model of public-humanities engagement, amplifies voices that would otherwise not be heard.

The goal is to build connections with these communities so that students, researchers and community members are working truly in partnership. And that these communities not only retain ownership of their artifacts, but that they also own the digital version of their materials.
As we plan history harvests with different communities and at different scales, we needed to consider not just efficiencies, but also a way to acknowledge ALL THE LABOR, including their various perspectives, contributions, our collective gaps, AND as Susan Brown states in her Doing DH chapter entitled “Towards best practices in collaborative online knowledge production,” “the platforms -- and I am inserting here -- processes -- that only work because OF PEOPLE.” We know that people are center to all digital humanities endeavors, but I really appreciated the way Dr. Maria Cotera very strongly articulated this in her keynote yesterday as she emphasized “relationships over tools” and building “collectives” and not just “collections.”

As Alex Gil posits in yet another definition of “minimal computing,” we were also governed by “What do we need?” and were particularly interested in exploring these “other factors” of minimal computing as we created a roadmap or schemata for our history harvests.
As we “diagrammed” our collective needs, premised on lightweight solutions to record and amplify histories, we reflected post-facto on how the workflows, human interactions, and community contexts map nicely to Ernesto Oroza’s notion of “architecture of necessity.”

History Harvests are about, first and foremost, communities -- the stories they want to share and how they want to share those stories, and are localized by the very definition of community.

Each community manifestation, and I am expanding this idea of community to include students, researchers and the community members sharing their stories, will vary and has varied in terms of technical know-how, but all agree on the goals and outcomes of storytelling and story-sharing.

Through these agreements, we created a modular schemata or self-diagram as Oroza states in this quote that makes the many moving parts work together.
Due to time, we will quickly cover history harvest and minimal computing themes around engagement and replication with a focus on our student contributors.

In this photo of a chalkboard, Dr. Craig’s students from her Digital History class summed up themes from readings that highlight: trust, flexibility, community, equitable partnerships, and communication.

In retrospect, the themes that emerged from these student-led discussions about their readings on public humanities and history harvests map to Sayers’ essay on “minimal definitions” and illustrate how the minimal computing ethos is implicitly present in how non-DH folks already think about collaborative computing projects.

I’ll turn it over to Maks to share a few concrete examples and who will also draw more heavily on Sayers’ essay.
To continue. As Varner points out in “Minimal Computing in Libraries”, although minimal computing may have a small footprint design-wise and in its consumption of server space, from a labor perspective, it’s not necessarily minimal.

In our case, the labor was substantial. In an inclusive way that enfolded participants into the History Harvest.

We had a variety of participants from across Indiana University Bloomington. We had the community. Students. Staff. And researchers. All participated in the whole ecosystem of the History Harvest. Each contributed in particular ways.

The community, staff, and students all contributed artifact-objects.

Undergraduate students from H301 ran the process, from intake to processing and then research, guided by staff and graduate students from the Institute for Digital Humanities and the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society.

We focused the History Harvest as an examination of how students maintain their socio-cultural identities on a college campus, away from home and/or their native
cultural groups.

DON’T READ

“...while minimal computing may be small in terms of design and server space, it is not necessarily minimal from a labor perspective.” —Varner, “Minimal Computing in Libraries: An Introduction
With so many participants of various roles literally walking into the picture during a pre-pandemic campus event, we needed a schematic to collect the info we needed that wouldn’t devolve into chaos.

Our central tool was a single basic Google Sheets spreadsheet. This was created and added to when community members filled out a simple Google Form.

The students and the staff who participated in the History Harvest all used varying parts of the spreadsheet to do their work. Crucially, the students quickly understood the importance of the data in the columns.

Students soon encountered the messy underbelly they would spend weeks and then months developing as they worked to create a final static site. They worked with a Github repository, and were visibly wary and unsure at their initial encounter with markdown files and file versioning. This was by design.

Sayers, in “Minimal Definitions”, notes that when we call for minimal design, we ought to ask where the pile-up is. How content becomes “just content”, static. And what types of expertise and decision-making is assumed when minimization is a
guiding force. He notes, for example, that it’s crucial to share the “mess of
development,” consciously overriding a danger within minimalist aesthetics, the idea
that everything’s been polished or refined from the very start—even when the source
files are available on, say, Github.

So, how did we get from a spreadsheet, to a draft, to a final product?

DON’T READ:

Sayers notes that “In calls for minimal design, we might therefore ask where the mess
is, how content becomes “just content,” and what sort of expertise and decision-
making minimization assumes. It is often important, for example, to share the mess
of development with others, and minimalist aesthetics may all too easily afford an
impression that everything has been polished or refined from the start (e.g., a form
outside of history or an idea from the heavens), even when the source files are
available (e.g., via GitHub).” (Sayers, Minimal Definitions)
We started with the spreadsheet. We transformed that into simple markdown. And we used the markdown to publish a simple site.

The spreadsheet was put through a Microsoft Word Mail Merge. This resulted in one large, Markdown file, a compendium of boilerplate entries for the sum total of the various artifact-objects, with specific fields containing the data students collected. That’s our Step 1, not displayed above. That Word file was then saved as a plain text, markdown file.

Exhibit 2, on the left, is a simple PHP script, used to split the master document into individual files. Exhibit 3 is a sample of the result, one markdown file each for every artifact-object.

These Markdown files were uploaded into Exhibit 4, a class GitHub repository. There, over the next several months, students researched the artifact objects and fleshed out the remaining fields with their research.

Exhibit 5 shows what the Jekyll site generator did with those markdown files. It renders a simple yet aesthetically pleasing static site. This public-facing portal
presented students’ efforts to the Indiana University Bloomington community...and the world at large.

Sayers notes that “Minimal design applauds...simplicity; it boils practice down to necessities. The Jekyll site generator is an obvious example: ‘No more databases, content moderation, or pesky updates to install....technical details and configurations are rendered less significant than the message or substance of composition: ‘just your content.’” [Minimal Definitions]
Our mechanisms were minimal. We had a basic Google Form. This generated a simple spreadsheet easily exportable as a CSV file. Students used sticky labels and markers to keep track of objects lent to the team for processing. Our markdown files were auto-generated using a basic Microsoft Mail Merge and a simple PHP script. Project participants made iterative updates over the course of months to a Github-based repository.

Sayers notes that if maintenance is minimal, it still asks us to consider the formats we choose, the change histories of the formats and the files they instantiate, the flexibility of those formats and files over time, and how much demand they make over time for updates. In this, we created a file set using the most minimally complicated formats and methods possible.

Students got the full experience of wrangling with the “mess of development”, including file versioning and editing, something quite new to many an undergraduate at whatever stage they encounter it! And students themselves made choices that affected the publication of the content they collected as the generated, static site.
DON'T READ:

“Minimal Maintenance...asks us to consider the formats we choose, their change histories, their flexibility over time, and their demand for updates” (Sayers, Minimal Definitions)
We want to end here by touching briefly on Sayers’ notion of “minimal externals and the DIY movement.”

Minimal Externals. This includes how considerations of power and internal organization determine the contours of a swath of computing practices. These include considering where repositories are housed. Who maintains and contributes to those repositories. Who moderates and reviews them. And how they’re accessed today and into the future.

The Do It Yourself ethos of students taking ownership of the History Harvest process, from capturing the initial data to iteratively updating a GitHub repository, allowed students to not only shape the themes. They can come back and rebuild and repurpose the content.

Thank you.