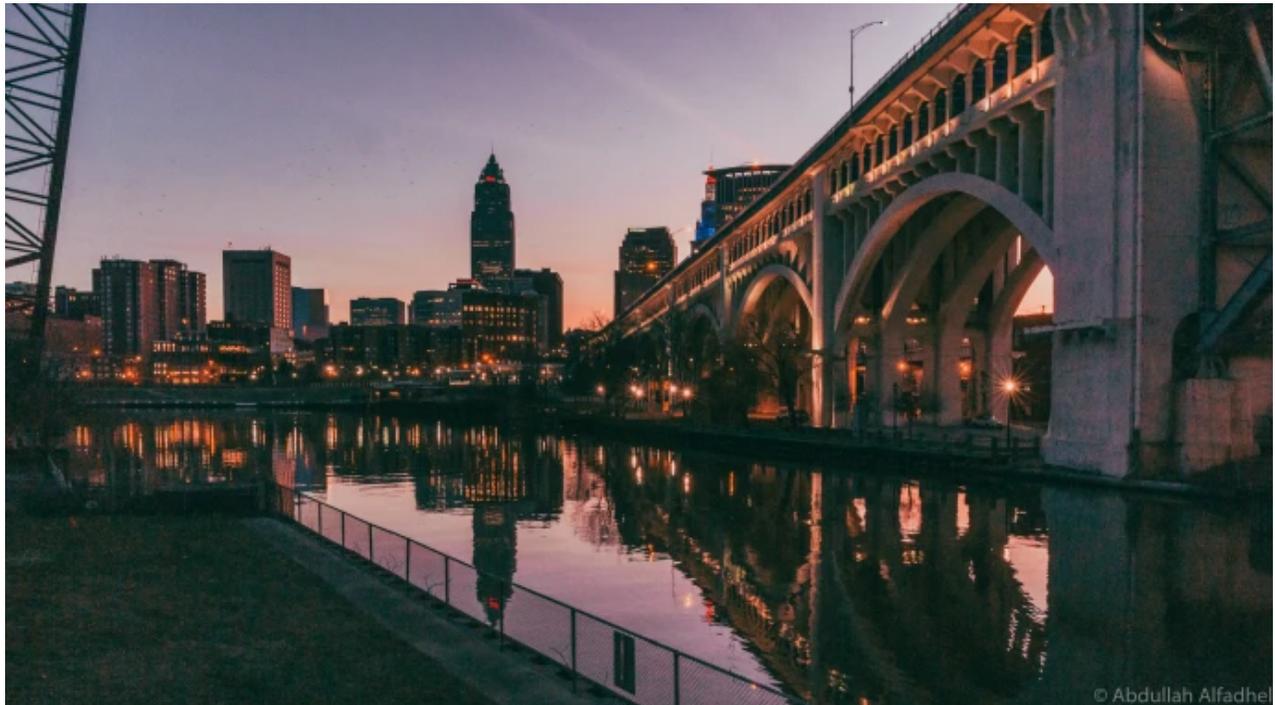


BLOG POST

## Cleveland Divided: Rust Belt Revival

By Katharine G. Trostel, Mary Frances Pipino, Elizabeth Kavran | September 22, 2020



Downtown Cleveland. Image courtesy of Abdullah Alfadhel, an Ursuline College student photographer.

In the fall of 2020, Ursuline College launched an NEH-funded project focused on the issues of inequity in our specific cultural landscape, the Rust Belt. Cleveland—a prototypical Rust Belt city—and its inner-ring suburbs include an array of distinct neighborhoods that are historically divided by ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status. The region is typically characterized as a place of poverty, discrimination, neglect, and population decline. Recognizing the potential of the humanities to unpack and address these regional needs, we created a series of courses that threads its way through our core curriculum, allowing students to earn a certificate by completing the “Rust Belt Pathway.” Through the pathway, whose design was guided and shaped by the voices of community organizations in partnership with faculty and staff expertise, students cultivate the skill sets that

allow them to be cultural problem-solvers; they are the citizens who will help to write the next chapter of Rust Belt revival.

Our project recognizes that institutions are rooted in regional ecosystems. At Ursuline, a small, women-focused Catholic liberal arts school located in Pepper Pike, Ohio, we are especially aware of a divided Cleveland. In 2020, Bloomberg placed Pepper Pike at #43 on its list of the “200 richest cities in America,” <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-20/in-america-s-richest-town-500k-a-year-is-now-below-average> recording the average household annual income at \$267,268. While our school is located in an affluent, predominantly white suburb, many of our students commute to campus from Cleveland proper or inner-ring suburbs—straddling two different realities on and off college grounds. These disparities have only been magnified by the COVID-19 crisis, emphasizing the urgency of this work. An impressive eighty-five percent of Ursuline’s graduates stay in the northeast Ohio region; in the fall of 2019, 31% of our students came from historically under-represented populations and approximately 50% of our undergraduate students are first-generation. As an institution, we are uniquely poised to bridge the gap between our campus and its surrounding urban fabric. In a recent article, [Forbes](https://www.forbes.com/sites/prestoncooper2/2020/07/15/which-colleges-are-fulfilling-the-promise-of-intergenerational-mobility/#26a7ea663bc0) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/prestoncooper2/2020/07/15/which-colleges-are-fulfilling-the-promise-of-intergenerational-mobility/#26a7ea663bc0> ranked Ursuline number one in the nation for student mobility. And, while classrooms at Ursuline are often deeply divided—politically, racially, socio-economically—we have found that conversations that center creative production can bridge divides.

The Pathway charts a way forward for the Rust Belt as we interrogate how we teach our rooted history so that our students can leverage their voices and activate social change. Our pathway focuses on content (the Rust Belt as a cultural laboratory) and concrete skills (digital humanities and community-based story telling). This project allows students to look at the fabric of their region from a myriad of disciplinary perspectives. Core values of the public humanities are infused throughout the program, and partnerships help us to amplify community voices and histories, inform contemporary debates, and navigate difficult experiences.

An illustrative example is a newly developed English course (designed with the support of a Modern Language Association's Humanities Innovation Grant to meet the core requirements for a literature class) entitled: “From Rust Belt to

Revival: Exploring the legacy of segregation, inequality, and social justice through the lens of the Anisfield-Wolf canon.” It was created with support from Cleveland’s [Anisfield-Wolf Book Award <https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/>](https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/), the only juried prize in the nation for books that confront racism and celebrate diversity, and is rooted in the idea that literature is a vehicle for social justice. The annual ceremony brings renowned authors and scholars to the city to explore globally and locally important themes such as race and identity. In a Rust Belt city like Cleveland, marred by a history of segregation and uneven decline, these themes are of special significance. The class is committed to the spirit, literature, and activities of Anisfield-Wolf; students read the canon, meet the authors, explore the legacy of the founder, and enliven and contemporize the works through the digital humanities. The class culminates in the creation of a public-facing exhibit. Last year’s cohort elected to create a series of podcasts, addressing topics that ranged from redlining to Cleveland’s [Inter|Urban <http://interurban-cle.com/about/>](http://interurban-cle.com/about/) mural project—a city-wide public art initiative spanning our public transit lines whose murals take direct inspiration from Anisfield-Wolf award-winning texts.

The linked courses forming the pathway span disciplinary boundaries. In a digital photography class, capturing images is framed as an act of witnessing. Students collect the visual images that represent distinct neighborhoods in greater Cleveland—a practice that plays a powerful role in helping them to think critically about the developing history of their city and their role within this landscape. In a history course, students learn how to collect oral histories by interviewing women activists and leaders in the Cleveland region. In the field of bioethics, students perform evidence-based, data-driven ethical assessments of public health challenges in northeast Ohio, and propose potential solutions based on their findings. As both part of the lecture and lab in a biology course, students collaborate and discuss the role of the human in the environmental problems prevalent in northeast Ohio such as water pollution in Lake Erie. Throughout the semester, they create and present infographics specific to each problem detailing causative agents, ramifications, barriers that have prevented change, and potential solutions. Our historic preservation department gives students the opportunity to learn about Cleveland architecture and how to tell stories about place and space. In a common core course taken by all of our students, “Identity, Diversity, and Community,” students engage with issues of social justice and equity including

local manifestations of practices such as redlining, access to healthcare, and environmental racism.

All of the deliverables from these courses—photographs, digital interview files, infographics, podcasts, data visualizations—are stored in what we are calling the “Rust Belt Repository” on our website. This database of student-generated materials can be integrated into classrooms and used as material for digital exhibitions and future initiatives.

Ursuline’s mission to provide a holistic and transformative education demands that we prepare our students to tackle the region’s challenges and embrace its opportunities. Extensive practices of redlining (affecting housing, health outcomes, and internet access, to name a few facets of its long-standing legacy) remain a seemingly intractable source of inequity that the city must address. Both the city (Cleveland) and the county (Cuyahoga) have recently declared racism a public health crisis, all while our region confronts the effects of a precarious media landscape. In April 2020, Cleveland saw a substantial change to our media-sector when our major newspaper, the Plain Dealer, laid off twenty-two journalists and announced that they would no longer be covering Cleveland proper or Cuyahoga County. These challenges highlight the importance of locally rooted practices of storytelling—both to expose and examine the issues that face our region and to gather the evidence necessary to construct a different future.

Explore our project: [www.ursuline.edu/neh](http://www.ursuline.edu/neh)  
<<https://www.ursuline.edu/academics/neh>>

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