Richard Pryor's Peoria
www.becomingrichardpryor.com
Reviewed by Emily Vinson, University of Houston

Created by Scott Saul, in collaboration with The Spatial History Project at Stanford University[1] and the University of California, Berkeley's D-Lab,[2] *Richard Pryor's Peoria* (RPP) serves as the digital companion to Saul's biography *Becoming Richard Pryor*.[3] Building on the extensive research conducted by the author, RPP is "an experiment in the digital humanities, an attempt to open up the work of a biography for the digital age. Traditionally, biographers have done their research—rooting around in archives, conducting interviews, sleuthing for missing puzzle pieces—and then streamlined that research to write the story of the person in question."[4] This site, however, provides visitors with access to the larger, messier view of Pryor's childhood, family, and hometown, which both enriches Saul's narrative of Pryor's complex early years in *Becoming Richard Pryor* and provides visitors with an insight into aspects of early twentieth century American life that are not often exposed.

In the introduction to the companion biography, Saul describes the difficulties earlier biographers faced as they attempted to tell the story of Richard Pryor's life. Not only was Pryor himself often elusive during interviews, "his elder relations were tight-lipped with outsiders to the family—a habit of circumspection they'd acquired from years of operating in Peoria's underground economy."[5] In Saul's work, Pryor is treated as a historical figure, thus we see the approximately 200 news clippings, photographs, and official records (which have all been tagged with a controlled vocabulary) that constitute his research on Pryor and his family, community, and hometown.

The homepage of RPP features an introduction that concisely summarizes the goal of the site. Additionally, several "Featured Documents" rotate on a sidebar, offering visitors a quick entry point to the site's rich content. Navigation of the site takes place along a banner at the top of the home page broken down into five main sections: People, Places, Eras, Themes, and More. Through these lenses one can place Richard Pryor, an African American child born to unwed parents during

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[1] *Spatial History Project*, accessed April 4, 2016, http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/index.php.
[2] *D-Lab*, accessed April 4, 2016, http://dlab.berkeley.edu/.
[3] Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).
[4] "About the Site," *Richard Pryor's Peoria*, accessed January 11, 2016, http://www.becomingrichardpryor.com/pryors-peoria/home/about/.
[5] Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, xiii.

segregation, raised in a brothel run by his grandmother, and educated in an almost all-white school, into the contexts of family, place, and time that helped shape Pryor into one of the greatest American comedians of the twentieth century.

The first section, "People," features a helpful network diagram that maps the connections between Pryor and the people who constituted the central relationships of his early life. Color-coded into categories for family, employers, teachers, and friends, each individual is also mapped to where they interacted with young Pryor—such as his home turf of North Washington Street, school, or the George Washington Carver Community Center. Each individual's name links to a page that consists of a short biography that describes his/her role in Pryor's life along with archival documents. Here we can trace the marriages and divorces, legal troubles and happy moments of the Pryor family. These documents, many of which are news clippings from local papers or legal records, speak volumes about what must have been a tumultuous childhood.

The next section, "Places," identifies the physical spaces that made up young Pryor's universe in Peoria. His grandmother's two brothels and the family-owned tavern, the George Washington Carver Community Center where young Pryor met an influential teacher who encouraged him to pursue comedy, and the clubs where he booked his first paying gigs are a few. Included are maps designed to contextualize the important haunts of Pryor's youth, which were located in the working class area of Peoria known as "the Valley," in contrast to the wealthy section, "the Bluffs." These maps and supporting archival documents help visitors to the site see Pryor's birthplace as a functionally, if not legally, segregated city. "Places" also provides a more general introduction to Peoria in the early twentieth century. Despite a reputation as a dull Midwestern town with none of the excitement found 160 miles away in Chicago, Peoria was actually home to a considerable illicit economy— including gambling, prostitution, and organized crime. RPP illustrates the realities of mid-century Peoria via archival documents, including maps, newspaper clippings, a 1939 dissertation on Peoria's notably high divorce rates, and magazine articles (including a 1955 *Reader's Digest* article expounding on the city's reform movement by another notable Peoria native, Betty Friedan).

In "Eras" we are provided with a dynamic timeline, beginning with the birth of Pryor's grandmother in 1890 and running through the birth of Pryor's own son in 1962. As in the "Places" section, "Eras" is concerned as much with the complexities of the African American experience in Peoria as it is with Richard Pryor. Running parallel to the timeline of the Pryor family, RPP identifies six unique eras and contextualizes the Pryor family within the larger issues facing the city and nation. Similarly, the "Themes" section seeks to provide biographical insights and archival documents not only about Pryor and his family but also the rapidly changing Peoria.

Finally, a "More" section provides visitors with a tag cloud, which conveniently assembles all tagged content for easy discoverability; information about the biography *Becoming Richard Pryor*; and an "About Richard Pryor" section which

mirrors the five sections of the biography. Of particular interest to this reviewer is the "About the Site" section, which contains information about the sources of the archival documents found on RPP and Saul's description of his motivation for creating this digital humanities component to the traditional biography. Saul describes experiencing "Eureka!" moments during archival research, a feeling likely familiar to most archivists. He writes that in creating RPP it was his hope that others might feel this sense of discovery and make their own connections between the archival documents, Richard Pryor, Peoria, and the U.S. in the early- and mid-twentieth century. Saul sought to "create a more open-ended experience," and I believe that this concept could easily serve as inspiration for other digital humanities projects that use archival material. Much as the biographer must make decisions about what details to include and omit from a biography, archivists must make tough decisions about the arrangement of a collection, which might inadvertently shape a researcher's interpretation of the archival record. By utilizing the flexibility of online presentation, archives could either post discrete digitized collections with limited narration for visitors to explore free of boxes and folders, or curate materials based on topical themes from across their collections so that visitors are free to either follow the narrative provided or look for their own connections within the archival content. This type of "open-ended" approach applied to diverse and varied archival content could lead not only to "Eureka!" moments for visitors, but perhaps also to new scholarship.

While the author does not go into great detail about the tools on which this project is built, links to resources from the D-Lab and The Spatial History Center are provided for further exploration. D-Lab offers the UC Berkley community "services, support, and a venue for cutting-edge research design and experimentation in data-intensive social science."[6] Classes offered at D-Lab cover a wide variety of topics to aid social science researchers, from web scraping and automated text analysis to geocoding and mapping. Stanford University's Spatial History Center "is a place for a collaborative community of scholars to engage in creative spatial, textual and visual analysis to further research in the humanities."[7] This site is particularly worthy of a visit, as they feature many innovative and engaging visualization and digital humanities projects in the "Recent Publications" section of their homepage.

Richard Pryor's Peoria allows visitors the opportunity to follow different storylines created by the archival content, and question the linear narrative presented in the biography format. While it is certainly an exciting content-rich experience when viewed as a companion to *Becoming Richard Pryor*, it also works as a stand-alone site. The site is successful in its effort to expose visitors to the complex workings of the biographer in his attempt to reconstruct the life of a historical figure and is an excellent digital humanities model for archives to consider.

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[6] "FAQs," *D-Lab*, accessed April 4, 2016, http://dlab.berkeley.edu/faq-page.
[7] "About the Project," *Spatial History Project*, accessed April 4, 2016, http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/page.php?id=1.