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“Un-writing American History: Reimagining What Constitutes Evidence in the Historical Method”

An Honors Thesis Presented by
May Kotsen

To the Department of History
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
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Introduction: An Exploration of the Methods Behind History

“History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”¹

-Michael-Rolph Trouillot

A Response to James Sweet

On August 17, 2022, the American Historical Association published an essay written by its president, James H. Sweet. Sweet’s essay, “Is History History?” sent shockwaves across the historical community, receiving major criticism from many, including many Black historians, but also receiving praise for those who thought Sweet brave enough to speak out against the recent trend of “presentism.” Presentism, or the use of the present lens to understand the past, is something that Sweet and many others claim is plaguing the practice and discipline of History. Sweet makes the argument that in recent years, History has been used as a way to support political agendas and that History’s “objectivity” has been lost in the process of reckoning with things such as legacies of enslavement or gun control. Sweet’s idea that we must return to a time when history was objective, when it wasn’t being manipulated by the 1619 Project or as a way to “confirm current political positions,” is reminiscent of Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again.” Just as many have asked Trump, “When was America ever great?” I ask Sweet, “When was History ever objective?”²

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015).

² James H. Sweet, “Is History History?: Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” August 17, 2022, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present>.

Sweet believes that in recent years, history has become a “grab bag” which people can use to justify their political positions. He claims that “When we foreshorten or shape history to justify rather than inform contemporary political positions, we not only undermine the discipline but threaten its very *integrity*.”³ My question is, when did History have integrity? Did History have integrity when it created American history textbooks that were used in Indian Residential Schools that had no mention of African enslavement and Indigenous genocide? Did History have integrity when all the sources that qualified as evidence were written by white men? Sweet describes the “sameness” that occurs because of political relevance as “ahistorical.”⁴ This was the same word that Indigenous Americans were labeled when they were told that because they did not have a written history; that they did not have any history at all.

Perhaps most ironic, however, is the idea that recent historical trends mean that historical narratives are being shaped by today’s voices, instead of the voices of the historical actors that they are about. This idea is completely disproved by my thesis. I argue that traditional History, History which only uses written sources, often only allows for white and privileged voices to be heard. We *must* use sources created by the historical actors themselves to tell more accurate histories and to ensure that the discipline of History remains relevant. Sweet’s fear of presentism marks the beginning of the end of the discipline of History. If the discipline of History continues to go down a path in which marginalized peoples have no agency, in which people cannot make connections between the past and the present, History books will become something reserved for dusty bookshelves on retired professors’ bookshelves and History *will* become a thing of the past. I have identified and researched thirteen examples of historical narratives preserved by the people who actually lived the history. None of these narratives would have been included as

³ Sweet, “Is History History,” 2022.; My emphasis added.

⁴ Sweet, “Is History History,” 2022.

History in the discipline that Sweet wants to return to, but they all do exactly what Sweet argues History must: they are methods of historical preservation that are preserved by the people who experienced the history themselves.

Why This Matters: The State of History Today

In a groundbreaking report released in the Spring of 2022, the Zinn Education Project, a historical education nonprofit, released a report entitled, “Erasing the Black Freedom Struggle,” which detailed state and national failings in teaching Reconstruction in public schools. The report found a massive disparity in the way Reconstruction is taught, compared to what actually happened. They found that at least fifteen states used a Dunning-era narrative to frame their curriculum, including Connecticut, the state which I am writing this thesis from. As described in the Report, the Dunning school of thought:

...portrayed Reconstruction as a period of intense political corruption where ‘ignorant’ Black people were manipulated by dishonest Northern ‘carpetbaggers,’ and Southern ‘scalawags.’ Dunning infused his writing with racist interpretations of the period under the guise of historical empiricism and objectivity. As such, Dunning and his students lent academic credibility to what were actually white supremacist distortions of the Reconstruction era.⁵

The state standards in Connecticut state that students must “analyze reasons that the Reconstruction era could be seen as a success and reasons that the Reconstruction era could be seen as a failure.”⁶ As described in the Report, this success/failure framing is pervasive in most of the states that teach Reconstruction, and it is extremely problematic because it doesn’t allow students to see all the ways in which Black people made individual choices to fight for change (and were successful in many ways), as well as the purposeful and violent choices that white

⁵ Ana Rosado, Gideon Cohn-Postar, and Mimi Eisen, “Erasing the Black Freedom Struggle: How State Standards Fail to Teach the Truth About Reconstruction” (Zinn Education Project, 2022), <https://www.teachreconstructionreport.org/>.

⁶ Rosado, Cohn-Postar, Eisen, “Erasing the Black,” 2022.

people made in response. Georgia follows this same structure, having students compare and contrast the goals of the Freedmen's Bureau with the goals of the KKK, establishing the idea that the KKK is a comparable institution, an organization that had successes and failures.⁷

Ranking each state's standards on Reconstruction on a scale from 1-10, using the presence or lack of key concepts as points (meaning of freedom, control of land, control of labor, Freedmen's Bureau, Positive Legacies, etc.) as well as teacher testimonies and other points of evidence, only five states got a score above a 5, and 36 states got a 2 or below. Even more, as of April of 2022, a minimum of 42 states had bills introduced in their state legislatures that banned teaching "controversial topics." While the overwhelming majority of states are teaching Reconstruction in a way that drastically minimizes the achievements of Black Americans, and pacifies the choices of white Americans, these states are being targeted to teach even less about Reconstruction, to avoid teaching about Black History at all (even if it is already insufficient).⁸

This thesis will explore the ways in which historical narratives have been twisted by white historians, in order to not only justify an unjustifiable history but to make sure that marginalized groups stay in the margins. Black Americans have not been the only target of these purposefully skewed histories though. Indigenous Americans face the most lack of representation out of any group. In a 2012 study, Vasquez-Heilig, Brown, and Brown reviewed the Texas standards and found that "only 33% of the standards specifically addressed issues related to the lived experiences of individuals and groups of color with the majority focusing on Blacks and Latinos." Only 4% of that 33% included Indigenous Peoples. Not only were only 4% of the state standards about Indigenous peoples and histories, but on a national level only "86.66% of the state-level U.S. and state history standards dictate the teaching of Indigenous Peoples in the

⁷ Rosado, Cohn-Postar, Eisen, "Erasing the Black," 2022.

⁸ Rosado, Cohn-Postar, Eisen, "Erasing the Black," 2022.

context of pre-1900 U.S. history.”⁹ Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia are the only states in the country that reference an individual Indigenous American in their state standards, and Sitting Bull is the only one mentioned more than once.¹⁰ If Indigenous history is taught, the overwhelming majority of it involves teaching about histories such as the Pilgrims, the Trail of Tears, or westward expansion. Indigenous peoples are rarely regarded as living peoples today, with individual thoughts, choices, and actions. By only teaching pre-1900 history and by not highlighting important historical figures, states are enforcing the idea that Indigenous peoples are a people of the past and people who things are *done to*, something not only extremely inaccurate but extremely dangerous to Indigenous people today.¹¹

How did we get to a place where History state standards are so inaccurate, so lacking, and so limited? We all know that what students learn in school from kindergarten to 12th grade impacts the way they think and the way they see people around them in innumerable ways. This pattern is not something new, or some Reagan-era law that shifted at the end of the 20th Century. From the very beginning of public schools, spearheaded in part by Black activists during Reconstruction, white leaders have made it their mission to ensure that they had control over the curriculum. These white curriculum writers knew how valuable school was in shaping a young person's mind. From the get-go, they have made sure to prevent accurate histories which teach the true history of this country from being taught. They did this by aligning with the historical method, by claiming objectivity could be found through the study of written sources. While

⁹ Sarah B. Shear et al., “Manifesting Destiny: Re/Presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 68–101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.999849>, 69, 81.

¹⁰ Wayne Journell, “An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards,” *Journal of American Indian Education* 48, no. 2 (2009): 18–32, 24

¹¹ Shear, “Manifesting Destiny,” 81.

approaches to history—social, political, women’s history, etc.—might have changed over the decades, the structure created by Enlightenment-era historians, one which prioritizes written evidence above all else, has stuck. This method has ensured that only certain histories are taught, that only certain voices are heard. This has trickled down into state curricula and is the main reason why they are so inaccurate and limited today.

The Legacy of Enlightenment Era History: How Written Evidence Became Scientific

The history of History in the United States is a history not separate from that of Europe, nor a simple history, easily described in a timeline. In *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, Peter Novick explores the history of the idea of historical objectivity, or the idea that historical facts come *before* and are *independent* of an interpretation. In order to be “historically objective” a historian’s interpretation must account for all of the facts in the history. The value of the interpretation thus rests on whether it is “factual” or not. Thus a historian must be neutral or disinterested, and a historian can never be an advocate or a propagandist.¹² While the “scientific fact” was first incorporated into History during the Era of Enlightenment, empiricism and objectivity reached their pinnacle at the turn of the 19th Century.¹³ Historical objectivity served as a framework scholars could use to differentiate themselves from the amateur historian, and this quest towards objectivity is what created the foundations of professional historiographical thought.¹⁴ However as Trouillot so eloquently articulated in *Silencing the Past*, “Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to

¹² Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 12.

¹³ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 45.

¹⁴ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 16, 34.

the construction of the narrative as such. At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.”¹⁵

It was this professionalization of History that led to the founding of the American Historical Association in 1884. Out of the AHA came the spread of Leopold von Ranke’s ideas in America, with Ranke first gaining fame in his native Germany. Ranke, the first honorary member of the AHA, is seen by many as the father of modern historical scholarship.¹⁶ Ranke believed that it was the job of historians to “simply say it how it was” and he perpetuated an idea of rigor or the idea that Historians must go to all means to verify all facts.¹⁷ Ranke was also obsessed with writing the history of famous male leaders, causing him to lose some credibility in Germany but gain more momentum in the United States, a country that was reeling from a loss of identity because of the Civil War.¹⁸ Growing up during the Era of Enlightenment, Ranke’s motto was known as *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it really was). As described by a Yale historian:

...can methods of investigation which are strictly scientific be applied to the past action of the race, in such a way as to give our knowledge of what happened greater certainty? The school of Ranke has never endeavored to go beyond [this] question, but their answer to it has been a clear and, I believe, an indisputable affirmative.¹⁹

While Ranke was not the only European historian used to shape the development of History in America, his ideals, oftentimes misconstrued by Americans, were foundational in the way History was approached in American universities and among professionals. Alongside Ranke’s ideas came positivism, the idea that “objective knowledge about cause and effect is attainable via

¹⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

¹⁶ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 39.

¹⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 36, 39.

¹⁸ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 37, 39, 42.

¹⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 42.

objectively analyzed data.”²⁰ These two philosophies in tandem supported a wide-scale adoption of the scientific historical method among scholars in the United States.

In Universities, the quest to make History as scientific as possible took many shapes. In an AHA presidential address, Albert Bushnell Hart wrote that historians needed a:

genuinely scientific school of history which shall remorselessly examine the sources and separate the wheat from the chaff; which shall critically balance evidence; which shall dispassionately and moderately set forth results....In history, too, scattered and apparently unrelated data fall together in harmonious wholes.²¹

History professors and professionals were arguing that once facts were sorted, once the “truth” was found using the limited documents available, objective historical narratives were possible to write.²² This push towards empiricism was heightened by post-Civil War sentiments among white Americans, a shift towards the “austere rather than the ornate.”²³ As Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote, “the more distant the sociohistorical process is from its knowledge, the easier the claim to a ‘scientific’ professionalism.”²⁴

Professionalization and objectivity went hand in hand in the 19th Century. This was largely done through historians trying to create a standardized technique.²⁵ As stated previously, in order to create a differentiation between that of amateur historians and novelists, a method was standardized, one that rested on objectivity and on the use of written sources as evidence. The professionalization of history decreased the number of controversies and criticism, as they had a

²⁰ Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2001), 13.

²¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 52.

²² The idea of “limited stock of documents” or evidence was very pervasive at this time (and still is today) but is an inaccurate claim. While this may be true for written documents, it is not true for non-written documents, documents which were and still are ignored.; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 53.; Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable*, 3.

²³ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 56.

²⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 213.

²⁵ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 72.

clear method to point out when critiqued and because of the need to remain “moderate.”²⁶ Controversies were also lessened because of the “degree of ideological homogeneity” which existed among white, Protestant, upper-class, male Historians. In order to make the Civil War historical, historians found themselves searching for objectivity and found that in scientific racism. Historians could write a narrative that was objective and that downplayed the role of slavery and racism, by using scientific racism to explain the inherent failings of Black people (in a “scientific way”).²⁷

Around the same time as the history of the Civil War was being incorrectly written, historians found themselves wondering how best to teach history in schools. While there was some controversy about whether scientific history should be taught in schools, historians with a scientific agenda persevered. A nationalist tradition of history writing was added, “that would seek to present distorted ideas of the past with the idea of glorifying one country at the possible expense of truth.”²⁸ These questions were being discussed by historians because of the spread of public schools (which will be discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 1). Institutional history was favored not only because of its “objective” learnings but also to create national reconciliation or to “heal” the country of its wounds from the Civil War and Reconstruction.²⁹ The vast majority of Northern historians who had reservations about what was being taught and written decided that conceding would show fairness and impartiality.³⁰

The ultimate irony was that although these textbooks were created under the guise of ultimate objectivity, they were anything but. While it can be easily argued that objective history

²⁶ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 80, 93.

²⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 86.

²⁸ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 97.; Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable*, 9.

²⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 99-102.

³⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 106.

is never actually objective, or even possible, it was during Reconstruction that “objective” history became even more inaccurate, because of a need to maintain the class and race hierarchy that existed before the Civil War. The country was close to falling apart, both after the Civil War and after the tumultuous period of Reconstruction. Rather than addressing the real cause of the Civil War and recording the true history of Black success during Reconstruction, white historians made the decision to create a national narrative, one that by default had to downplay the effects of slavery and the progress of Black Americans.

Today, content has evolved, and although many historians today do not claim objectivity, one thing has not changed: method. According to the American Historical Association, primary sources are “sources that were *written* at the time of the event.”³¹ The first historical society opened in the United States in 1791, the Massachusetts Historical Society, wrote that their mission was “the preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts, and records containing historical facts...” Not only have historical societies continued in the same vein today, but archives have followed the same model.³² Perhaps a more holistic definition of a historical source can be found in *From Reliable Sources*. Howell and Prevenier define sources as “which historians construct meanings...a source is an object from the past or testimony concerning the past on which historians depend in order to create their own depictions of that past.”³³

Howell and Prevenier go even further to address methodological weaknesses in written evidence explaining that diaries or memoirs cannot be read to gain facts but should be read in

³¹ American Historical Association, “Writing History: An Introductory Guide to How History Is Produced,” n.d., <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/for-students/writing-history-an-introductory-guide-to-how-history-is-produced>.; My emphasis added.

³² Elisabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity,” *The American Archivist* 63, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 126–51, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.63.1.h554377531233105>, 134.

³³ Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable*, 19.

order to understand the author's perception of the events. This distinction is key and is something I will be highlighting in the rest of the thesis. All of the methods that I write about in this thesis face criticism in the historical community because of their potential inaccuracies and because of their lack of "provability." Howell and Prevenier acknowledge the incredibly important idea that written evidence suffers from the same problems or challenges that oral histories and material culture suffer from. Historians have done their best to attempt to interpret written sources and that same effort (and those same skills/frameworks) must be applied to oral histories and material culture as well. Even more, a variety of types of sources can be used *alongside each other* to most accurately preserve history. Perhaps History could be considered then as an Art, instead of a Science: as the Art of creating meaning through sources from the past.³⁴

What History *Should* and *Must* Look Like

This thesis argues that historians must expand their conceptualization of a historical source to include oral traditions and material culture. Oral traditions and material culture cannot be an additional type of evidence that historians use when they can't find anything in the archive. They must be used alongside and to the same magnitude as written sources. There are a wide variety of reasons why certain communities could not or did not preserve their histories with pen and paper. Some communities were denied the ability to write purposefully, such as in the case of enslaved Africans. Because of the restrictions of their captors, enslaved people turned toward familiar methods of historical preservation from Africa such as music, as well as invented new forms of historical preservations, such as patchwork quilting to preserve their histories.

Some communities never prioritized written evidence in the first place. Such as the case of many Indigenous nations in what is now the Americas, many groups had systems of

³⁴ Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable*, 148.

knowledge preservation that were just as sophisticated as writing. One of the best examples of this are wampum belts, which will be further elaborated on in Chapter 2. Indigenous Americans in the United States have been made to feel that they had no history because they did not write their history down. Even more, white Americans were aware that these historical methods of preservation existed, as they made it illegal to own wampum belts in the 19th Century, yet they still perpetuated the idea that Indigenous Americans were “a-historical.” Accordingly, a historical method that prioritizes written evidence is incapable of properly preserving and telling Indigenous histories.

Not only have Black American and Indigenous American histories been disregarded because of their lack of archival presence, but immigrants who came to the United States experienced a similar phenomenon. As demonstrated by Italian Americans and their reliance on food as a medium to preserve histories from Italy, or as demonstrated by Japanese Americans who used a museum to preserve their histories about their forced detention in concentration camps, groups which have been actively silenced in the archive have found their own ways to make sure their histories are preserved. This is also demonstrated in the case of *testimonios* or a method of historical preservation that was born because of a lack of historical methods that existed that were capable of preserving histories of genocide and extreme conflict. While all of these methods have been used for a variety of reasons—some out of necessity, some that have been practiced for centuries—they all share the common element of not being found in the archive. In a time when historians claim to be invested in telling histories of marginalized communities, historians must turn towards the methods used by these communities themselves and reimagine what History truly is.

Widening the Discipline: Who We Should Turn To, To Diversify Our Methods

Historians must turn towards other disciplines such as Anthropology, American Studies, Art History, Archaeology, and even Environmental Studies in order to best approach a multitude of sources. In the discipline of American Studies, scholars have adopted the idea that texts are porous, an idea that historians should consider adopting. As described in “Making Context Matter,” “Resonance and porosity remind us that texts are ‘vehicles for meaning,’ and that this meaning is not generated in a vacuum.” Context and text are inseparable and inform each other. Texts cannot be seen as rigid because contexts are not rigid.³⁵ Historians should also turn towards Anthropology’s conception of a “thick description” or the idea that physical behaviors cannot be understood without their context. This means that data is the anthropologist’s construction of other people’s construction of what they saw or experienced. Accordingly, for historians, historical analysis is the interpretation (by the historian) of someone else’s interpretation of what they witnessed.³⁶

Literary Studies is also a discipline that historians should turn to in order to have access to a greater set of sources. In “Venus in Two Acts” Saidiya Hartman, an incredibly transformative writer, and Black woman, identifies the irony of trying to understand African American history through written texts. She writes about the challenges of constructing African American history when so few written records exist:

Yet how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?...Can we, as NourbeSe Philip suggests, “conjur[e] something new from the absence of Africans as humans that is at the heart of the text”? And if so, what are the lineaments of this new narrative? Put differently, how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective

³⁵ Adam Golub, “Essays Notes and Dialogues: Making Context Matter: American Studies and the Connecting Imagination,” *Society of Americanists Review* 1 (2018): 113–33, 120.

³⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 2017), 9.

biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom? How can narrative embody life and words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?³⁷

While Hartman is approaching the challenge of written sources from a literary perspective, her point rings true. How can we as historians write about the history of Black Americans when almost the entirety of the written evidence that exists during enslavement describes them as products that can be purchased and used? She furthers this argument by explaining that there is not a single autobiographical narrative of a woman who survived the Middle Passage. She ponders how she as a writer or us as historians can write their history without their voice. She states that writing counter-histories of slavery is inseparable to her from writing a history of the present. Illuminating their voices, through whatever means or method necessary is an act of liberation and reparations.³⁸ She introduces an idea proposed by Michel de Certeau which states that there are two ways in which history can affect the present. The first is in situating oneself in the present through understanding one's history, and the second is in interrogating the "production of our knowledge about the past."³⁹

Before reading History books was the norm, people accessed history through "celebrations, site and museum visits, movies, national holidays, and primary school books." In the 1950s and 1960s Americans learned more about the history of the American West in movies and television than in scholarly books. Professional historians like to ignore the fact that historical production occurs in many sites, beyond the professional realm. Even more, because professional historians can't "express" political opinions, historical events that are the most important for marginalized groups are covered even less by professional historians, causing

³⁷ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>, 3.

³⁸ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

³⁹ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

people to have to turn inwards to find interpretations of their histories.⁴⁰ Author of *Thinking About History*, Sarah Maza argues that because professional historical scholarship occurred during the height of European imperialism, European styles of historical preservation have been cemented as History, as countries in the Global South have been forced to adopt it in order to actually be practicing History. That is why it is so important that the methods highlighted in my chapter are preserved. They are forms of historical preservation that have survived the imperialist forces that tried to eliminate any other way to practice History.⁴¹

Perhaps the most important perspective on the question of objectivity comes from Haitian Anthropologist and writer of *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that “Historical representations—be they books, commercial exhibits or public commemorations—cannot be conceived only as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge. They must establish some relation to that knowledge.”⁴² Trouillot gets at the core of the issue by acknowledging the relationship between the source and the knowledge. Accordingly, it wouldn’t make sense for a culture that never historically used written evidence to write its history now. This idea also gets at the larger issue that method is not neutral. The method chosen is historical and chosen with purpose. He introduces the idea that humans are both actors and narrators in History.⁴³ He also argues that historians must acknowledge the distinction and the overlap between process and narrative, as people are agents, actors, and subjects in History.⁴⁴ Trouillot defines historicity as the embrace of the ambiguity which exists between the sociohistorical process and the construction of that narrative. He argues that the most important

⁴⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 455-484.

⁴¹ Sarah C. Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 78.

⁴² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 36.

⁴³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 176.

⁴⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 498

part is the process and conditions that allow for the narrative to be produced, and through studying that we can “discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.”⁴⁵

Michel-Rolph Trouillot and his book *Silencing the Past*, have been one of my largest sources of inspiration for this thesis. His idea about power starting at the source in history, caused me to question everything I knew about History and to really challenge myself to broaden my conception of what a source is. The fact that Trouillot was an anthropologist, yet wrote one of the most important pieces of literature in the historical community, just strengthened my belief that we must widen the discipline of history to include other methods and perspectives that have been assigned to other disciplines. Saidiya Hartman is a scholar whose work I only truly read in-depth once I started this project, but a scholar whose ideas quickly became influential in my work. Her idea of “critical fabulation,” or the idea of combining historical and archival research with a fictional narrative, in order to make up for what has been left out of the historical record, is very similar to what my thesis argues.⁴⁶ While Hartman sees the answer to this question as being historical fiction, I see it as expanding our historical sources and finding a multitude of voices that exist beyond the archive. I know that expanding the types of sources we use is not only important because of the type of agency it gives back to communities, but because it makes historical narratives more accurate. I am not calling for historians to ignore facts, or to not seek them out, rather I am arguing that accurate facts can only be sought out through a variety of different methods.

⁴⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 526.

⁴⁶ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

The argument I am making in this thesis is not a new one nor is it mine alone. Indigenous and Black scholars have been calling on white historians for decades to diversify the types of sources accepted in the historical method. This thesis does not argue that this idea is new, but rather provides support for this argument through thirteen case studies that prove that history does in fact exist outside of the archive. Lastly, the people most influential to the development of my thesis have been the people around me, and the histories I was surrounded by growing up. I have been privileged enough to be trusted by members of communities I grew up in and communities I was new to, with histories that were not written about in books. Through all of these experiences, I have been able to conceptualize a History in which all histories are told by all different people.

An Overview of the Chapters Featured and Why I Chose Them

While there are many examples of methods of historical preservation, I chose to only feature six methods for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons was the scope of this paper. I only had one academic year to write this thesis and I had to write it alongside taking other classes and working several jobs. The most significant reason why I chose these chapters though is because of my relation to them. I am of the belief that writing histories that you have a relation to, histories which have impacted your life, can not only in some cases be more accurate than the perspective of an outsider, but can be liberatory to the writer. While I am more of an insider in certain chapters and more of an outsider in others, I have a relation to all of them and am invested in the histories they have preserved. This thesis has served as almost a memoir for me. It has allowed me to go back through my life and examine the ways in which certain moments and certain people have affected me. Although I am still young, this thesis has served as a way

for me to articulate my experiences and how they have shaped my perception of the world around me.

The first chapter of my thesis is different from my others, as it provides a framework to establish what narratives have been falsely told and why. I discuss Frederick Jackson Turner's *Frontier Thesis* and use the themes I gathered about the legacies of settler colonialism to contextualize a close reading of History textbooks used in Native American Industrial Schools. My second case study features Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which I contextualize in the larger movement of resistance that Black teachers have led in order to teach accurate histories. The rest of my chapters all feature one method each, and I employ 2-3 case studies per chapter in order to prove that the designated method preserves history in a way that written evidence could not.

My second chapter features wampum belts in *Hodinöhsö:ni'* nations, a method I learned about through my experience interning at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum, or the *Onöhsagwë:de'* Cultural Center in the summer of 2021. I worked at the museum for six weeks and was mentored by incredible Seneca elders, Seneca museum staff, and Seneca scholars. It was at the museum that I was first exposed to beaded wampum belts and how they preserved histories. It was through listening to Jonie, an elder, and the Collections director, explaining to me such rich histories through looking at a singular beaded belt, that my questioning of the historical method started developing. To Jonie, and to many *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens, unraveling a wampum belt was the same as opening a book. At the museum, I was presented with a contradiction I did not know existed. I had been taught in school for years that pre-colonial Indigenous history had not been recorded. Staring down at the belt in front of me, I was confronted with the reality that this was not the truth.

My next chapter focuses on Black women quilt-making. When I was first identifying what I wanted each chapter to be about, I wanted this chapter to be about “feminist-quilt making,” which I had been exposed to through my great aunt. Hearing about her role as an activist in the 70s from my mother and grandmother inspired me to research the political nature of quilts. It was during my research that I learned about the incredibly rich history of quilt-making among Black women, which caused me to change gears and focus on that specifically. Although I had some experience with quilts, I had no experience with quilting in Black women's circles. Through reading background information from Black quilt historians, a clearer picture started to form. While some quilts created by Black women have been praised for their artistic integrity, quilts created by Black women have been severely underestimated in terms of their historical value. Through studying these quilts, I got to see the perspectives of Black women whose histories were not in the archives, women who experienced remarkable historical events, but whose voices were deemed too insignificant to preserve.

Chapter 4, or my chapter on preserving oral traditions around the dinner table among Italian Americans, is the chapter most personal to me, and the chapter that was the most shaped by my childhood experiences. Hearing all of the stories of my family growing up, stories about Ellis Island, or family tiffs in my grandmother's neighborhood, and then not reading histories that looked like that in my history classes, caused me to question what History truly was. Some may argue that this chapter is the most specific and that perhaps a broader analysis, such as an analysis of the purpose of food among all immigrant groups, would have been more effective. I push back on that idea. While the chapter is specific to the experiences of Italian Americans, it provides the framework necessary for the reader to imagine their own experiences with history growing up. While not everyone who reads the chapter will be able to relate to the specific

traditions described, all readers will be able to relate to the “informal histories” that surrounded them growing up.

Chapter 5 focuses on the music of the Black Freedom Struggle. I decided to focus on this for one of my chapters because of my involvement with music for the last decade of my life. As someone who has played trombone for fourteen years, and played in jazz bands for eleven of those years, jazz has been one of the largest influences on my life. When you spend hours a week playing and listening to music, you quickly realize that music is storytelling. While I have been privileged enough to meet so many jazz musicians and play many great songs, I had not truly researched how something so close to me was so important in the larger movement of the Black Freedom Struggle. That was largely because of the separation I was able to create as a white woman and because of my position as someone who was in a predominantly white band program. While most people understand the ways in which music created by Black musicians has lyrics that can preserve history, many do not understand how studying musical transcription can illuminate a lot about Black history and the music performed by Black musicians. This chapter aims to expand on that idea.

Chapter 6 focuses on Community Museums, something that I also was first introduced to at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum. Working at a museum that was entirely different from any museum I had ever been to before, disrupted everything I knew about museums and set my research down a completely different path. After my time at SINM, I spent all of my time during my Museum Studies certificate program researching Community Museums and was lucky enough to meet the director of the Anacostia Community Museum in the summer of 2022 through my internship at the Zinn Education Project. Researching Community Museums for this chapter, I was able to truly articulate what I had felt at the Seneca Iroquois National Museum.

Understanding the ways in which a museum is set up structurally can influence the histories it displays is essential for anyone who visits a museum or for a community that wants their histories to be accurately displayed in museums.

Lastly, chapter 7 focuses on *testimonios*. I would consider *testimonios* to be one of the largest contributors to my political radicalization. I was first exposed to them during my sophomore year in high school by my Spanish teacher, and they completely changed how I viewed the U.S. government, my position as a U.S. citizen, and the history of North America as a whole. Every *testimonio* I have read since has changed my perspective on the history of this region and that is why I decided to include it in my thesis. As someone who has never been to Central America, and as someone who has never had to survive genocide, I tried to make sure to center the voices of those who had. My two case studies tell the histories of two different countries however they both preserve histories that were actively silenced and erased from the archive. While most absences in American history taught today can be traced back many centuries, *testimonios* highlight histories that are being silenced in the present moment. *Testimonios* serve as a way to hold governments accountable, and to hopefully prevent many mistakes that have occurred in remembering atrocities of the past from happening again.

All of these chapters highlight methods of historical preservation that many historians do not consider to be historical. I do not just argue against these historians, but I aim to prove that they are wrong through my case studies. Not only do I highlight two or three examples of each method I focus on through my case studies, but I provide the framework necessary to approach them historically. Just as in analyzing written evidence there is a set of questions that the historian must ask themselves in order to contextualize the source and identify bias, I explain the (often very similar) framework that is necessary for these methods. Approaching these methods

may seem daunting to historians or students of history. I argue that this needn't be the case, as we have so many experts we can turn to and so many histories yet to be told.

Positionality Statement

This thesis aims to challenge what History as a discipline is in every aspect. While the overarching focus of the paper is to challenge what types of sources are considered “scientific” and worthy of being included as evidence, this paper also focuses on the underlying theme of agency, voice, and position in one's history. As Louis Cohen argued in *Research Methods in Education*, “reflexivity is the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part or influence on it.”¹ The social-historical-political location of myself, as the researcher, inextricably shapes my research.² My social-historical-political position has affected what I chose to write my thesis on, what content I decided to focus on in my chapters, what kind of evidence I decided to use, how I interpreted the evidence, and so forth. No matter how “scientific” a historian tries to make themselves, there will always be bias and subjectivity. That is why it is extremely important for me to be transparent about my many positions as a researcher and human, as well as why it is so important for historians to challenge what type of evidence they consider to be “scientific.”

It is extremely important to acknowledge that this thesis operates under the assumption that settler colonialism has far-reaching influences that extend beyond the time of the physical genocide of Indigenous peoples. While this paper treats this idea as fact, some historians and social scientists do not believe this to be so. Not only do the effects of settler colonialism extend to the political sphere, but I believe and operate under the assumption that they have intimately

¹ Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, Eighth edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2018).

² Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 4 Edition (New York: Routledge, 2019).

shaped how History was created as a discipline in the United States, and in the broader “Western” sphere. Under that understanding, forms of historical preservation that do not align with what was created to justify a history of settler colonialism, are inherently acts of resistance against settler colonialism. While some historians might see the forms of evidence that I discuss as “neutral” I argue that that is impossible. In a country founded on the genocide and enslavement of millions of people, the traditions of historical preservation in these groups are inherently resisting the long-lasting effects of settler colonialism.

It is also important for me to address my potential influences on my research because of my positions. I have a multitude of identities as someone who is white, queer, a woman, disabled, upper-middle class, a leftist, and an undergraduate who is 22 years old. All of my life experiences and identities have shaped both what I decided to write about, how I gathered evidence, and my conclusions. My many positions have influenced my research in many ways. Perhaps most important is my position as a white woman writing about many traditions of historical preservation that have been preserved by communities of color. No matter how hard I can try to empathize with the communities I am researching and writing about, there is no possible way for me to truly understand the lived experiences of these communities. Because of that, I try to always elevate the voices of the communities I am talking about. I try to never speak for these people, or make assumptions for them. Almost all of my secondary sources are written by people who align with the communities that they are writing about, and all of my primary sources were created by members of the community that the chapter is about. While my overall argument is unique to myself, I do not try to take credit or claim that I am the first person to acknowledge the radicalness of these forms of historical preservation. This paper instead tries to

elevate these traditions and combine them in a way that provides a new understanding as a whole.

Chapter 1: What History Got Wrong: The Failures of Our Over-Reliance on Written Evidence

“The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.”¹

-Michel-Rolph Trouillot

The Purposefully Inaccurate Narratives of Indigenous American and African American History in the United States

Before exploring methods of historical preservation that better preserve histories than written evidence, I must identify the two largest narratives surrounding American history that have been inaccurately preserved and remembered because of our over-reliance on the written source. The first of these narratives is the way in which we remember settler colonialism and the ways in which we (wrongly) conceptualize the “disappearance” of Indigenous Americans and the spread of “Americans” westward. The idea that the United States was a blank slate, that besides some occasional bloody wars here and there (instigated by the Indigenous Americans of course), the land of the United States was open, and basically begging colonists to colonize it, is the focus of Case Study #1. Case Study #1 highlights an essay that was a trailblazer for its time, Frederick Jackson Turner’s *Frontier Thesis*, which established a precedent for American history, a narrative of manifest destiny that solidified the erasure of Indigenous Americans from American history.

Turner’s essay, considered the pinnacle of historical research, and progressive for its time, is a perfect example of the ways in which these false narratives of settler colonialism have been constructed by the written word. This Case Study not only illuminates the ways in which

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015, loc 207.

Turner was able to craft a completely false narrative through the sole use of written sources but the ways in which these false narratives, perpetuated by historians such as Turner, were further ingrained in the consciousness of Americans through history books and textbooks. Because of History's over-reliance on written evidence, students were learning almost all of their history through textbooks, thus allowing even more inaccuracies to be taught. This was especially the case at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where students were not only forced to read inaccurate American history textbooks but were told that they had no history because their history wasn't in these books. The books that students in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School were forced to read will be further analyzed in Case Study #1.

While Turner's essay is a great example of the problems that can arise when only using written sources, Case Study #2 is slightly different. In Case Study #2, I focus on Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, a book that describes the ways in which inaccurate histories around enslavement and Reconstruction allowed white people to retain power over Black individuals. While Woodson uses primarily written sources as evidence, he also includes interviews, testimonies, and personal experiences. I chose to focus on this book because it explores which narratives have been selected to be taught and why. All of the narratives that white educators decided to mandate in schools are supported by written evidence. Woodson makes the argument that a more holistic approach needs to be taken and that Black voices must be heard, even if that means using different types of sources. Woodson's book provides a unique window into what narratives were being hand-picked to be taught to recently enfranchised Black Americans. He also draws upon the long-practiced traditions of resistance on behalf of Black educators, a history that has been actively silenced.

Both of these case studies highlight two incredibly important historical narratives that have been inaccurately taught. The inaccuracies in these narratives, which were purposefully created, have astronomical implications for today. The narrative that America was empty, and that Indigenous Americans have no history, has led to Indigenous Americans not being able to vote, for murder to be the third leading cause of death among Indigenous women, and the construction of pipelines that poison the rivers that all Americans rely on to live. The ways in which America has remembered enslavement and Reconstruction are also just as significant. The inaccurate narratives taught about African American history causes Black children to wonder why their ancestors weren't brave enough to escape the plantation, why their family hasn't been able to accumulate generational wealth, or why people who look like them are never credited with the creation of America. In order for these two inaccurate narratives to be challenged, historians must examine what sources have allowed them to be so inaccurately written. It is through the examination of these sources that historians can begin to craft a more accurate history, featuring the voices of those who actually experienced the history themselves.

Case Study #1: The Myth of the Frontier: Curriculum as Genocide in Native Residential Schools

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian, published “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” an essay that changed the way American History would be taught and remembered forever. This paper, published and delivered to the American Historical Association in 1893 in Chicago, emphasized the idea that “settling” the American frontier was what allowed Americans to formulate a distinct American identity, despite coming from so many different places. He wrote that “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession,

and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”² Turner thought that the history of the American West was by far the most important history. He argued that “American social development” had been continually being reborn at the “frontier” as the combination of new opportunities in the West along with “its continuous touch with the simplicity of a primitive society” allowed a distinct American identity to emerge. Turner argued that even the question of slavery should be viewed only in relation to how it contributed to westward expansion. Turner wrote in great detail about the ways in which the West has had an impact on Americans, but his overall argument was centered around the idea that the need to expand, or to colonize, is inherent in men, that colonialism equals Americanization.³

Perhaps one of the most interesting takeaways from Turner’s incredibly significant essay is how he addresses Indigenous Americans and their land. From the beginning, Turner uses the words “primitive” and “uncivilized” to describe a frontier without Americans. His use of the term “winning” to describe colonization is interesting because it implied that Turner was aware that the frontier was not empty, yet he only addressed the presence of Indigenous Americans a few times in the whole essay. One of his core points was the idea that the American frontier is much different than the European frontier because it lies on the edge of “free land.” Unlike the Europeans who must assimilate into already occupied spaces, Turner argued that Americans were able to continue to develop their American identity because of the freedom of emptiness. Turner then goes on to perfectly demonstrate what Philip Deloria would later articulate in his book *Playing Indian* in 1998. Turner wrote that:

It [the frontier] takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around

² Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *American Historical Association*, 1893, 197–227.

³ Turner, “The Significance of”, 1893.

him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.⁴

This is one of the only times that Turner mentions the presence of Indigenous Americans in the West, which would imply their inferiority in Turner's mind. However, Turner, like so many others, cherry-picks certain stereotyped ideals in order to create an American identity, while refusing to acknowledge that Indigenous Americans exist and have a right to the land they have stewarded for thousands of years.

Turner argued that the Frontier provided the perfect scene, one which Europe did not have, to understand the history of human evolution. Inferring that the land was a-historic, "savage," and a clean slate, Turner described the "spread of civilization" by starting with the pioneers, then the emigrants who purchased the land, and then finally the men of "capital and enterprise." All of this, according to Turner, allowed for a "composite nationality" of the American people to form. While the East Coast was English, the Midwest and Westward allowed people of different nationalities to identify with America. This space allowed for a "mixed race" group to form, one that was not English but American, but almost certainly still white. Turner argued that this space, the Frontier, "worked against sectionalism." It was "an open door to all of Europe" and what he describes as the middle region (the Midwest) created what was truly an American identity. According to Turner, this new American identity promoted democracy because of the sense of individualism it necessitated. Turner wraps up his argument by addressing the issue that he opened up his essay with: the idea that the frontier was gone, the first period of American history had ended.⁵

⁴ Turner, "The Significance of", 1893.

⁵ Turner, "The Significance of", 1893.

While Turner's work is fraught with racism, selective amnesia, and arrogance in regard to the accomplishments of white Americans, his idea that the impact of the Frontier, of colonialism, should not be underestimated rings true. Turner rewrote history to make manifest destiny seem inevitable, patriotic, and formative in the making of American identity. These themes that Turner invented about the history of America were taught in schools across the nation. They were especially emphasized in Indigenous Boarding/Residential Schools. While starting as early as the 17th century, Indigenous Boarding Schools took hold across the country in the 19th century. Thomas Morgan, an Indian Commissioner for the federal government said that it was, "cheaper to educate the Indians than to kill them."⁶ Many saw this to be true. In 1882 Senator Carl Schurz released a report saying that it would cost \$1,000,000 to kill an Indigenous person, compared to \$1,200 to educate an Indigenous person for 8 years.⁷ The most well-known of these "schools" was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879. Federally funded, the motto of the school's founder was "Kill the Indian, save the man," meaning cultural assimilation was the number one priority of the school.⁸ While the school implemented hundreds of techniques to strip Native children of their culture and practices, I am going to focus on what kinds of histories were taught to the students at Carlisle. How did Turner's thesis influence the curriculum? Which narratives were pushed? Which were not?

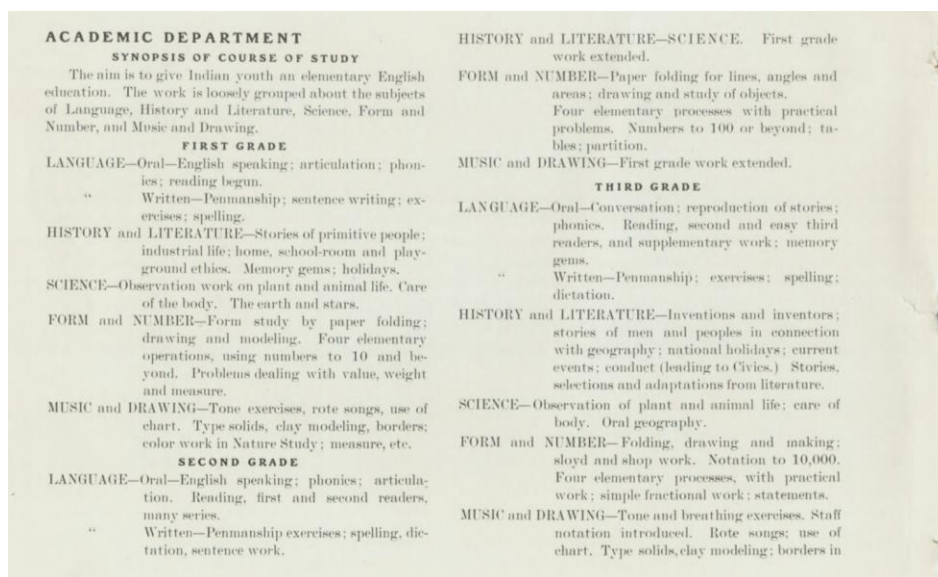
Every year the Carlisle Indian Industrial School released a report or a "catalogue" of all the records from the year. In the 23rd year of 1902, the school released a catalogue that

⁶ Owen Lindauer, "Archaeology of the Phoenix Indian School - Archaeology Magazine Archive," accessed April 3, 2023, <https://archive.archaeology.org/online/features/phoenix/>; Joy Meness, "The Curriculum of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School: An American Education." *The Pennsylvania State University*, August 2017, https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/14819, 7.

⁷ Meness, "The Curriculum", 7.

⁸ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 151.

contained a synopsis of what was taught in each subject. In first and second grade under “History and Literature,” students were supposed to study “Stories of primitive people; industrial life; home, school-room, and playground ethics. Memory gems; holidays.” In third grade, students studied, “Inventions and inventors; stories of men and peoples in connection with geography; national holidays; current events; conduct (leading to Civics).” In fourth grade, they continued what they studied in third grade using “Civics for Young Americans” as a guide. In fifth grade, they used the same book and also studied “Stories of Discovery and Colonization.” In sixth grade they studied “Colonial growth and Independence” using Dole’s “American Citizen.” In seventh grade they studied the “Formation of the government, beginning of the National Period; stories of other countries; reading the Constitution; State and county organizations” using Parts III and IV from Dole’s “American Citizen.” By eighth grade, U.S. history was done; in ninth grade they studied current events, and in tenth grade they studied “general” and “current” history.⁹



A scan of the Academic Department synopses, published in 1902.¹⁰

⁹ “Catalogue of the Indian Industrial School” (Carlisle, PA, 1902), https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/default/files/docs-publications/CIS-I-0040_0.pdf, 113-115.

¹⁰ “Catalogue of the Indian”, 1902.

It is extremely important that historians carefully examine what was being taught in History classes in the Residential School setting not just because it is historically significant to the history of Indigenous Residential Schools, but because the content taught in these schools reveals the most concise narrative of what those in power wanted Americans to believe. These schools were designed to “Kill the Indian, save the man.” What was taught in these schools, the narratives cherry-picked and invented, are extremely illustrative as to what kind of identity and history white America was trying to create for itself. The catalogue also lists which additional books were used in the history classes. These books included *Mace’s History Reader Book I*, *The Beginner’s American History*, *A History of Oklahoma*, and *Natural Advanced Geography*.¹¹ I have decided to feature the books that were accessible to me, but the few selected narratives accessible online reveal common themes throughout all of the books.

In *Natural Advanced Geography*, the “Man” section opens up by saying that mankind can be divided into three races and these races are “the white race, the yellow race, and the black race.” Clearly stating that the white race is the “most civilized of all races,” the book goes on to lump all Indigenous Americans in with northern and eastern Eurasia, and the Pacific Islands as the “yellow race.”¹² The “black race” is the least civilized out of all of the races.¹³ The book goes on to define the start of civilization, saying that it started when “Men at last learned to write, and were thus able to leave records of what they did and thought, they had advanced to a stage that may be called the beginning of civilization.”¹⁴ This idea is *extremely* important because it demonstrates that Native children were being taught that they had no history and that unless they

¹¹ Meness, “The Curriculum”, 157-163.

¹² Jacques W. Redway and Russell Hinman, *Natural Advanced Geography* (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company, 1898), 33.

¹³ Redway and Hinman, *Natural Advanced*, 34.

¹⁴ Redway and Hinman, *Natural Advanced*, 35.

started writing things down, they would never have a history. This point is directly challenged in Chapter 2.

In terms of how history was taught, the History section started with Christopher Columbus' discovery of America, inferring that this is the start of History. Not even a footnote is dedicated to attempting to explain the histories of America before Columbus at the start of the chapter.¹⁵ The textbook then goes on to state that the reason why America created a name for itself in terms of industry, was because of the hard work of white men, not even mentioning African enslavement.¹⁶ The one concession the textbook does grant is when it eventually writes about the Aztecs (Mexicas) in the "Countries South of the United States Section," where it says that the Aztecs had "advanced nearly to the stage of civilization."¹⁷ This textbook reinforces commonly used (and inaccurate) tropes about American history. Starting by ensuring that the Native children knew right away that they were inherently second-class citizens, the textbook reaffirms the idea that only societies which write their history can be civilized, thus the children in the school will only become civilized once they adopt this Euro-American practice of historical preservation. It also reaffirms the idea that their families, their ancestors, and their histories, are not historic.

In *Mace's History Reader*, similar themes are evident.¹⁸ The book tells the story of European expansion, briefly starting with the narrative of Marco Polo, but focusing on the European colonizers in America for the rest of the book. Providing great detail about Columbus' journey, the textbook describes how surprised Columbus' men were when they expected to see

¹⁵ Redway and Hinman, *Natural Advanced*, 47.

¹⁶ Redway and Hinman, *Natural Advanced*, 57.

¹⁷ Redway and Hinman, *Natural Advanced*, 98.

¹⁸ Although the 1909 version is the one that would have been used in the school, there are only six copies of that book left in the world, none that are digitized. I used the 1911 version, which is similar, instead.

Indians in elaborate clothing, and rather saw, “half-naked painted savages living in rude huts.”¹⁹ The book goes on to describe every Indigenous person that European colonizers encounter as “savage” or “primitive,” with the exception of the Aztecs (Mexicas) and Incas. The narrative style of the book reveals some interesting themes. When describing Cortés’ invasion of Mexico, the book says that the “Spaniards could hardly keep their hands off these ornaments they were so eager for gold.”²⁰ While this may be seen as inconsequential, it reveals much larger themes about the ways in which the atrocities committed by colonizers were downplayed or seen as inevitable. The book also illustrates a completely false narrative about Pocahontas, perhaps inspiring the Disney adaption that is also just as false. The myth of Thanksgiving is also evident, describing how great friends everyone became as they played games and ate together.²¹ In describing the French and Indian War, the book is quick to highlight Native “savagery,” writing, “The Canadian Indians now burned and scalped to their hearts’ content.”²² The book also did not once mention anything to do with African enslavement or the slave trade, seemingly glossing over that point in American history.

The last book that I analyzed was *The Beginner's American History*, published in 1902. Out of all the books used in History lessons, this book has the most Indigenous history content; however, it still fell short in almost all aspects. Each chapter focuses on a different person who was influential in shaping the history of the United States, and only one of the men listed, King Philip (Metacom), was not white. Like all of the other books, the book opens up with Columbus, leaving out all of the violence he and his men enacted against the Taínos they encountered.²³ Just

¹⁹ William H. Mace, *Mace's History Reader* (Chicago: The Rand McNally Press, 1911), 17.

²⁰ Mace, *Mace's History*, 25.

²¹ Mace, *Mace's History*, 86.

²² Mace, *Mace's History*, 132.

²³ D. H. Montgomery, *The Beginner's American History* (Ginn & Co, 1902), 5.; It is worth questioning the recent idea that Columbus is so revered because of Italian American pressure because of these sources.

like the previous books this book employs the term “discover” to describe Europeans arriving on land new to them.²⁴ This book also accurately describes the story of Pocahontas and Thanksgiving in the same ways as the other books.²⁵ Unlike the other books though, the book does explicitly mention enslavement, not describing any of the violence or systemic racism they faced, but still introducing the institution nonetheless.²⁶

The book does describe many of the altercations between white Americans and Indigenous Americans in great detail. Describing King Philip’s War, the book describes the justification of the war on behalf of the Wampanoags as being caused by their inherent hatred of white people, while not describing what factors contributed to this hatred.²⁷ The book describes many instances of Natives setting colonists’ villages on fire, stressing how many colonists were killed, but conveniently forgets to mention the Pequot Massacre.²⁸ The one time they do acknowledge colonists setting a fire, they refer to the Native victims as “poor *creatures*.”²⁹ *The Beginner’s American History* also very much emphasizes Turner’s ideas about the Frontier. In describing the construction of the “Wilderness Road,” what the book describes as the first path in that part of the country leading to the West, the book creates an image of utter openness and emptiness of the West.³⁰

While this is the only book reviewed that touches upon enslavement, it does an extremely limited job. The first time it elaborates on enslavement is when the invention of the cotton gin is

While Columbus Day became a holiday in 1937, these sources, all of which praise and start with Columbus, were written decades before.

²⁴ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 10.

²⁵ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 15, 26.

²⁶ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 18.

²⁷ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 36.

²⁸ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 39.

²⁹ My emphasis added.; Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 40.

³⁰ Montgomery, *The Beginner’s*, 71.

explained, and the success of Eli Whitney is highlighted throughout the whole chapter. It is also mentioned that Jefferson's enslaved captives "loved him," and that they thought "no one could be better than their master." It is even said that Jefferson was vehemently against enslavement, yet the book does not explain why he still had enslaved captives.³¹ In describing the Mexican-American war, nothing about the role of enslavement is mentioned.³² In describing the cause of the Civil War, the book says that "the main reason why so many of the people of the South wished to withdraw from the United States was that little by little the North and the South had become like two different countries." It does talk about the role of enslavement after that statement, but only very briefly and without details.³³ Describing the end of the War, it says that the "North and South could shake hands and be friends," and the book does not describe any of the challenges of Reconstruction.³⁴

As stated previously, the book heavily subscribed to themes presented by Turner in his essay. Describing westward expansion, the book states that, "the country stretched away west for more than a thousand miles, with nothing in it but wild beasts and Indians."³⁵ Describing Native resistance, the book states, "The Indians fought because they wanted to keep the west for themselves. They felt as an old chief did, who had been forced to move many times by the white men."³⁶ Even more, the book goes on to describe Andrew Jackson, the person behind the Trail of Tears, as "merciful and brave."³⁷ While the book includes more about the role of Indigenous Americans in American history, the times that they are mentioned are in times of violence or

³¹ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 86-87.

³² Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 114.

³³ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 124.

³⁴ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 126.

³⁵ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 90.

³⁶ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 95.

³⁷ Montgomery, *The Beginner's*, 102.

conflict, and oftentimes inaccurately portrayed. A Native child reading this book in a Residential School, a child who was denied the ability to learn about their history from their family, would have understood themselves to be naturally violent, uncivilized, and a loser of all battles.

These three books, books that were used in History lessons at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, highlight both the ways in which the federal government wanted Native children to feel about themselves and their histories, and the ways in which the federal government wanted to create an American identity through this falsely constructed history. The themes present in all three of these books, themes of exploration, resistance against tyranny, westward expansion, failure to admit wrongdoings, and superiority reveal the ways in which an American identity was being crafted. Fueled by Turner's essay, the idea of a bunch of immigrants turning a massive, empty stretch of land into an incredible country became the story that united all—that is to say, all white men. It is so important that historians not only examine these books but that they examine how these books were constructed. All of the books that I discussed were considered reputable History books. Yet they all shared the inconsistencies I described above. Did any of these books use non-written sources? Were any non-white people consulted in the making of these books? How do these books represent the failings of an over-reliance on written sources?

Case Study #2: Reconstruction and Public Schools: Sites of Oppression and Resistance

“When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.”³⁸

-Carter G. Woodson

³⁸ Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (United States: 12th Media Services, 2017), 39.

The way in which the history of African enslavement and Reconstruction after the Civil War has been taught is extremely indicative of the ways in which those in power want Americans to remember their history. Public schools have been the primary medium for this indoctrination to occur, despite the true origins of public schools in America. While the origins of public schools lie in Antebellum New England, on a large scale Public schools in the United States only became a reality after the Civil War, when a sudden and dramatic intake of youth and parents *demand*ed education for their children since they were no longer enslaved. Even before the end of the Civil War, during the War in fact, Black parents found teachers for their children in unlikely places, enlisting the help of Union soldiers and creating a space for Northern religious groups to organize schools. In January of 1865, a few months before the end of the Civil War, over 75,000 Black children were in schools, taught by around 750 teachers.³⁹

The process of the creation of a national public school system along with the corresponding curriculum was not straightforward. During Reconstruction and during most of the 20th century, the schools were segregated. These Black-only schools were taught largely by “sympathetic” white Northerners, oftentimes part of religious organizations, but were also taught by Black teachers as well. Most of the funding for Black schools came primarily from Black parents but was also supplemented by white, Northern, religious organizations as well as the Freedmen’s Bureau. During this period of early Reconstruction, there were some states that had more schools for Black students than for white students. When the Federal government withdrew from the South, most state governments decided to keep the Black public school model to adopt for their own purposes, yet all Southern states except for Louisiana and South Carolina were

³⁹ Lester C. Lamon, “Black Public Education in the South, 1861—1920: By Whom, For Whom and Under Whose Control?,” *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 3 (1983): 76–90, 77.

explicitly clear that the schools *must* remain segregated.⁴⁰ It was the unwavering insistence of Black parents, to demand (and fund) an education for their children, that created the public school model most similar to today, however, it was white students who arguably reaped the most benefits once the Federal government withdrew.

The historical narratives constructed by William A. Dunning, one of the most influential Reconstruction historians, were pervasive in curriculum relating to the Civil War and Reconstruction.⁴¹ Dunning and his students and colleagues produced a plethora of narratives detailing the “history” of the Civil War and Reconstruction. These historical narratives inspired media such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*. Dunning and his followers argued that Reconstruction had been an atrocity. His narrative argued that Northern Radical Republicans had been vindictive and had tried to make white Southerners suffer as much as possible, inventing the terms “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags.” He portrayed those in the KKK as gallant and Southern white people as victims. His narrative was even more pervasive because Black perspectives on the Civil War and Reconstruction, such as that of Du Bois, were restricted to being printed in the *Journal of Negro History* or private presses.⁴²

One of the largest arguments crafted by white historians was the idea that slavery had been a premodern institution and that it had not been profit-seeking. Slave owners were portrayed as caring individuals, who did a better job at looking after their slaves than the slaves could have done to themselves (as scientific racism portrayed Black people as intellectually inferior and quick to commit crimes). Even abolitionist white historians agreed that slavery hadn’t been about profit. Any economic benefits to the United States caused by slavery were

⁴⁰ Lamon, “Black Public Education,” 80.

⁴¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 101.

⁴² Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 297-298

erased and plantation life was re-written as idyllic and gentle. Historian Edward Baptist identified three false assumptions that were perpetuated about slavery at the time. The first was as described previously, the idea that American slavery had no influence on the modern economy or the rise of the United States. The second false idea perpetuated was that slavery would have ended even without a war because of the inherently democratic nature of the U.S. The third false narrative was that the worst thing to happen to slaves during this period was that they didn't have their liberal rights. This idea ignores the fact that millions of enslaved people were murdered, having a significantly larger impact than just loss of rights.⁴³ Not only were these narratives false when they were written, but they have left a legacy today that makes Black students feel shame like it was their ancestors' fault for not being able to escape slavery.⁴⁴

One of the best summaries of the state of Black education and the impact that certain curriculum (such as those just described) were having on Black children is found in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, by Carter G. Woodson. Published in 1933, Woodson's book argued that Black youth were being force-fed a white-washed narrative that ignored the realities of racism, in order to control them in all aspects of their lives. Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and the founder of *The Journal of Negro History*, also created "Negro History Week" which would eventually become what we know today as Black History Month. *The Mis-Education of the Negro* acknowledged the specific ways in which history was manipulated in order to exert control and in order to re-write the true painful history of the United States.

⁴³ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Paperback edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 255-268.

⁴⁴ Baptist, *The Half Has...*, 288.

Not only did Woodson argue that public schools were failing children, but he argued that public schools were failing *all* children.⁴⁵ One of his first arguments as to why history curriculums in public schools were so problematic was because all mentions of the achievements of Africans were omitted.⁴⁶ While students in elementary and secondary schools learned about the history of the Greeks, or of the “great” colonial empires of the West, little to no attention was given to the great African societies that achieved equal (or greater) technological and cultural advancements. Not only did this perpetuate the idea that Black students had no history, that where their ancestors came from is not historic, but it solidified the idea that euro-centric conceptions of time, the nature of the universe, etc. were the default, or natural. Even in colleges, the role of African art in the widely celebrated Greek and Roman traditions was not acknowledged. This, in turn, not only portrayed an inaccurate history of the development of European art styles but created a precedent that kept Black people from knowing the history of their own artistic productions, such as music. Woodson argued that since Black Americans were not taught about the musical traditions that existed in Africa that then developed into the distinctly Black American tradition so widely celebrated today, Black Americans operated under a deficient attitude, one in which they are not the players in their own history.⁴⁷

Woodson argued that studying the history of Africa was not only important because it allowed Black Americans to see themselves as historic and capable of “fine” culture, but also because of the political implications. Woodson claimed that one of the reasons why figures such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Napoleon were taught so much in history classes was not only because they were European, but because they represented the powerful and dominant man,

⁴⁵ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 81.

⁴⁶ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 8.

⁴⁷ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 64.

a man who took what he wanted. These histories were so well preserved and elevated because they portrayed the “winners” in such a positive light. Woodson stated that by teaching about African history, from an anthropological, historical, and sociological perspective, the histories of the “peasant” or “proletariat” would be much more well represented, arguably enabling the student to find political empowerment and a connection with who they are studying.⁴⁸ As Woodson wrote, “The oppressor has always indoctrinated the weak with this interpretation of the crimes of the strong.”⁴⁹

Perhaps most importantly, Woodson argued that teaching African history allowed Black Americans to realize that they were capable of resisting exploitation, of foraging their own destinies. Woodson eloquently summarized this idea writing:

The oppressor, however, raises his voice to the contrary. He teaches the Negro that he has no worth-while past, that his race has done nothing significant since the beginning of time, and that there is no evidence that he will ever achieve anything great. The education of the Negro then must be carefully directed lest the race may waste time trying to do the impossible. Lead the Negro to believe this and thus control his thinking. If you can thereby determine what he will think, you will not need to worry about what he will do. You will not have to tell him to go to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door he will have one cut for his special benefit. If you teach the Negro that he has accomplished as much good as any other race he will aspire to equality and justice without regard to race. Such an effort would upset the program of the oppressor in Africa and America. Play up before the Negro, then, his crimes and shortcomings. Let him learn to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton. Lead the Negro to detest the man of African blood—to hate himself. The oppressor then may conquer exploit, oppress and even annihilate the Negro by segregation without fear or trembling. With the truth hidden there will be little expression of thought to the contrary.⁵⁰

Woodson highlighted so many key points as to why white, powerful men had to ensure that Black students were not learning the true histories of their ancestors and how they arrived in the United States. By teaching Black students that they have no history, no past worthy of recording,

⁴⁸ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 71.

⁴⁹ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 89.

⁵⁰ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 90.

Black students were dehumanized and reduced to think that they were worthy of unequal treatment. Secondly, this quote highlights the utter importance of controlling what Black students thought, both to ensure that the country didn't have to reckon with its true history, but also to ensure that Black people did not gain political or economic agency. Controlling how Black students thought about themselves allowed for the actions of Black people to be much better predicted. If Black students were taught the truth of their history, they might question the foundation of a government founded on the contradiction of both "equality" and their ancestors' backs. Lastly, by teaching about famous European figures, those with power were making Black students hate themselves and were making Black students not advocate for their histories and rights because they felt they were not worthy of it.

Woodson addressed the idea of being able to control the actions of Black people by teaching them a certain history in his whole book. Woodson argued that not only did Black people accept an inferior status because of what they were being taught, but that teaching these histories caused Black people to seek out inferiority, and even more, without being told to. Teaching about the successes of white historical figures, and disregarding any Black history was a choice that was especially made after the Civil War during Reconstruction. Not only were any sort of histories written by or about enslaved people, but a new national (propagandistic) narrative had to be created.⁵¹ These historians who made a name for themselves during Reconstruction, such as William Dunning, were trained in Europe and were operating under the assumption that their approach to history was superior because it was scientific. Many other academics saw a uniform scientific method and did not question these historians. Not only was the method scientific, but scientific racism was pervasive during this time. These white historians

⁵¹ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 39.

during Reconstruction wrote an American history that portrayed enslavement as a “benevolent institution; the masters loved their slaves and treated them humanely.”⁵² It was radical abolitionists that messed everything up and introduced an idea that was “unnatural,” the idea that Black Americans could be a citizen worthy of equal treatment. It was these narratives that were created by the most “scientific” historians at the time, who were able to manipulate solely written sources, that were taught in public schools.⁵³

While Woodson agreed that Black teachers usually provided a superior education to that of white teachers, he still acknowledged many problems with the way in which Black teachers taught and how that affected students. These Black teachers were taught from the same problematic books that white teachers were trained with. All of the misconceptions about African history, Black American agency, and enslavement that white teachers learn about, are also instilled in the minds of Black teachers.⁵⁴ That is not to say that Black teachers were the same as white teachers, it rather meant that Black teachers had to go through an extra hurdle to challenge what they were taught and avoid teaching the same thing to their students. This reckoning that occurred, and the resistance against teaching racist curriculums, is what historian Jarvis Givens has labeled as “fugitive pedagogy.” Black teachers had a set curriculum that they had to teach but many of them still resisted. Many of these curricula included no mention of Black American or African history but did include studying “Latin, the Teuton, and the Mongolian.”⁵⁵

In a report released by the Alabama Department of Education entitled, “Elementary Course of Study,” the benchmarks for each grade are defined. All of the benchmarks are divided into two categories, “Social Studies” and “Science.” The first time that History is mentioned is in

⁵² Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 40.

⁵³ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 40.

⁵⁴ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 11.

⁵⁵ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 63.

fifth grade, “Citizenship, Geography, and History; The development of American Industries and the development of the American Nation.” In sixth grade, students learned about, “Citizenship, Geography and History; Europe, Asia, and European possessions; Old World background...”⁵⁶

The report goes on to further elaborate on what is taught in each grade. In second grade, students are expected to study the “local community, its centers of community interests, industries, and nature life...” In third grade students were expected to study “Jungle life in Central Africa, Desert life in Africa or Arabia, Life in the Cold Lands–Eskimos and Laplanders, Indians, Life in a Mexican Village, Life in China or Japan.”⁵⁷ In fourth grade students were expected to study “How our Country was Discovered and Explored. History of Alabama during the exploration period to be included.” This included:

1. The Pilgrim Settlers
2. Plantation Life in the Southern Colonies
3. Pioneer Life in Alabama

This plan is devised to give a background of early American History in connection with the study of early Alabama History. It omits the later part of Alabama History, which many teachers have found to be too difficult for pupils of this grade.⁵⁸

In fifth grade, students were expected to study the “Struggle For Independence and How Our Country Became an Independent Nation,” “How Our Country Grew from the Thirteen Colonies to the Vast Area it is Today,” “How the Slavery Question Almost Split the Nation into Two Parts,” and “The Growth of Our Country as an Industrial Nation.” This included:

1. The Exploration and Settlement of Tennessee and Kentucky.
2. How the United States obtained and settled the Louisiana Territory.
3. How the Oregon Territory was Obtained and Settled.
4. How Florida and Alabama were Obtained and Settled.
5. How the Southwest was Obtained and Settled.

⁵⁶ Committee on Courses of Study, “Alabama Department of Education: Elementary Course of Study” (Montgomery, Alabama, February 8, 1935), HathiTrust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951000935306j&view=1up&seq=4&q1=history>, 5

⁵⁷ Committee, “Alabama Department,” 7.

⁵⁸ Committee, “Alabama Department,” 9.

6. How the United States Acquired its Foreign Possessions.⁵⁹

Lastly in sixth grade students were expected to study Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages.⁶⁰

In *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching*, historian Jarvis Givens explores the way in which Black teachers resisted these harmful curricula. While each state's Department of Education (always made entirely of white men) gave teachers a pre-approved list of books and learning objectives, Black teachers developed unique ways to teach alternative histories. Tessie McGee, a Black teacher in Louisiana, would read passages from Carter G. Woodson's "book on the Negro" from her lap. If someone walked by, she had the approved books and standards laid out on her table.⁶¹ Women like McGee served as "double agents" in a time when six hundred Black schools in the South were burned in just ten years.⁶² As Givens wrote, "During Jim Crow, black educators wore a mask of compliance in order to appease the white power structure, while simultaneously working to subvert it."⁶³ The secret learning that occurred allowed students to learn that history could be taught outside of the textbook, and that acts of resistance were in themselves historical.

What is important to consider while looking at these grade standards, is not just what is said, but what is omitted. When discussing Alabama history, the Standard said that teachers do not need to teach the latter half of Alabama History because it has been found to be "too difficult" to teach. Conveniently this latter half is the history of brutal plantation life, the Civil War, and Reconstruction (including sharecropping). In fifth grade, students learn about how

⁵⁹ Committee, "Alabama Department," 9.

⁶⁰ Committee, "Alabama Department," 11.

⁶¹ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2021), 1.

⁶² Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 3.

⁶³ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 4.

regions were “obtained and settled,” implying that there was no one there on these lands to begin with. The only mentions of African history are “Jungle life in Central Africa, Desert life in Africa or Arabia” and Ancient Egypt, none of which would have been very relevant to the descendants of predominantly Western Africa. The only explicit mention of slavery is in the title, “How the Slavery Question Almost Split the Nation into Two Parts,” implying that the crisis from slavery is rooted in its division among white people, not in its atrocities against Black people.⁶⁴ These standards are what teachers legally had to teach in Black schools, however many Black teachers resisted and taught more relevant histories in their own ways.

While this secretive teaching was common in the Deep South during Reconstruction and at the turn of the 20th century, changes were eventually made as time went on and some teachers were able to be more explicit in what they were teaching, and even receive support from some School Boards. In 1935, three states, Texas, Georgia, and Delaware publicly declared that they would teach “Negro History” in Middle or High School. The assistant supervisor of “Negro education” in Georgia wrote:

We find that it is much better to have a special course for this purpose rather than leaving it to the judgment and thoughtfulness of teachers to bring before their classes vital facts and figures from time to time. The main drawback to such a course in the high schools has been that very little supplementary reading material has been available in order to enrich the course.⁶⁵

This statement is revealing in many ways. It reveals that many of the states decided to institutionalize Black American history so that they could have more control over what narratives were being taught. It also reveals the lack of written sources that existed about the experiences of Black Americans in history. This in turn necessitated Black teachers to draw on

⁶⁴ Committee, “Alabama Department,” 7-11.

⁶⁵ Carter Woodson, “Negro History Included In Curriculum Some Places: WOODSON GIVES REVIEW OF MOVE UP TO PRESENT 3 States Have Courses Scheduled; Other Cities Join List,” *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), December 21, 1935, sec. NATIONAL.

other types of sources. While it seems like the decision to include Black American history in the curriculum was a strategic choice by the white School Board members, Black teachers were now free to teach Black history openly and could continue to resist through teaching their own narratives that went beyond what the state laid out.

In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson also gave examples of what he envisioned as Black people challenging the narratives taught to them in upper-level education. He described a sociology student from Georgia who wrote a dissertation through collecting sayings of the people around him. Through writing down and categorizing everyday Black Georgian sayings, such as comments about the weather or reactions to unusual events, the student was able to build a literature around Black Georgia colloquial speech, far more important to him, than that of the history of the Queen of England.⁶⁶ In terms of college courses, there were many courses that described the colonization of the Americans from the European perspective, but none from the perspective of the enslaved Africans.⁶⁷ Again, not only did this mean that Black students weren't learning about their own histories, but the mobilization of millions of kidnapped and enslaved Africans is an incredibly large part of American history, one which *cannot* be underestimated.

Woodson introduced and argued for one more significant idea, an idea that would still be considered radical today. He argued that although enslavement was horrific, and something that Black Americans will have to reckon with indefinitely, the tragedy of enslavement allowed room for distinct art forms to grow. He compares this idea to that of the Greeks and the Poles, how they did not have such a distinct art form until their lands were invaded. This is not to say that Black Americans should be grateful, or downplay the violence they experienced, but rather this idea allowed Black Americans to move *forward* despite everything they went through. If Black

⁶⁶ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 17-18.

⁶⁷ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 64.

Americans allowed white Americans to erase the true histories of enslavement and racism, then white Americans were thus erasing the basis of what allowed an incredibly rich artistic tradition to arise.⁶⁸ Woodson concludes his book by envisioning what an accurate and representative curriculum would look like. He writes that:

We would not learn less of George Washington, "First in War, First in Peace and First in the Hearts of his Countrymen"; but we would learn something also of the three thousand Negro soldiers of the American Revolution who helped to make this "Father of our Country" possible. We would not neglect to appreciate the unusual contribution of Thomas Jefferson to freedom and democracy; but we would invite attention also to two of his outstanding contemporaries, Phillis Wheatley, the writer of interesting verse, and Benjamin Banneker, the mathematician, astronomer, and advocate of a world peace plan set forth in 1793 with the vital principles of Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations. We would in no way detract from the fame of Perry on Lake Erie or Jackson at New Orleans in the second struggle with England; but we would remember the gallant black men who assisted in winning these memorable victories on land and sea. We would not cease to pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln as the "Savior of the Country"; but we would ascribe praise also to the one hundred and seventy-eight thousand Negroes who had to be mustered into the service of the Union before it could be preserved, and who by their heroism demonstrated that they were entitled to freedom and citizenship.⁶⁹

Woodson imagined a curriculum that taught about the achievements of Black Americans, their roles in the creation of the United States, and their ability to achieve despite their subjugated status. I believe that the history that Woodson imagined necessitates using a wide variety of sources. You cannot tell the history of enslaved people from their perspective if you only use written sources, as slave owners went to all costs to avoid letting enslaved people learn to write. The same is true among most marginalized groups in the U.S., proving how vital it is that historians turn toward a diverse set of sources.

⁶⁸ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 66.

⁶⁹ Woodson, *The Mis-Education*, loc 73.

The Excuse of Objectivity: How Historians Have Covered up the True History of the United States

These two case studies illuminate the ways in which an American history that justifies the violence of white people has been crafted through the use of written sources. When accused of writing a racist or inaccurate history, white historians have been able to point to their historical method, the way in which they achieve objectivity, as a scapegoat. In *That Noble Dream*, Peter Novick writes, “‘Objectivity’ has been one of the central sacred terms of professional historians, like ‘health’ for physicians, or ‘valor’ for the profession of arms.”⁷⁰ This statement reveals the true irony of the objectivity question. Health is a subjective term that cannot be observed from the outside, and that cannot be defined in any sort of simplistic terms. Valor is also a wishy-washy concept that is not easily defined or achieved. Soldiers invading Iraq assumed that their choice was valorous, but many now think the opposite, after hearing about the lies that were made to start the war. While each of these professions—Historians, Doctors, and Soldiers—have a goal that they set out for, these goals are never truly attainable. Historians must forgo their obsession with objectivity through a method that prioritizes written sources above all else.

The idea that written evidence is the most “scientific” or “objective” type of evidence, is not true. White historians have claimed this rather because written evidence has allowed them to construct histories in which white settlers didn’t enact a genocide that killed millions of Indigenous Americans, or start a trade that involved kidnapping, torturing, and the labor exploitation of millions of Africans. As historian Jan Vansina reveals, this obsession with written sources being more accurate, objective, or scientific than non-written sources can easily be disproven. Eyewitness accounts, or the basis of what primary sources are in History, “never give a movie-like account of what happened...Eyewitness accounts are always a personal experience

⁷⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 23.

as well and involve not only perspective but also emotions.”⁷¹ To expand even further, “mediation of perception by memory and emotional state shapes an account.” Our perception of how something occurred can be shaped by previous knowledge, expectation, or the idea of “what must have happened.” This phenomenon affects written and non-written sources equally.⁷²

An important theme present in the 19th and 20th century textbooks featured in Case Study #1 is the idea that Indigenous Americans did not have a history before the arrival of Europeans. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, because colonizers could not find grammar books or dictionaries among the people they were colonizing, understand the structures of their languages, or find History books, colonizers concluded that they had no scientific knowledge, as lacking History.⁷³ Trouillot introduces the idea that several Indigenous American languages had a high degree of evidentials compared to European languages. For example, the language of the Tacuya would automatically distinguish between “I heard that it happened,” “I saw it happen” or “I have obtained evidence that it happened.” Does that mean that the Tacuya are actually more scientifically prepared to be better historical preservers than Europeans?⁷⁴ Power rests in the production of history. There has been an uneven contribution to the “historical record” not because of the content of one’s history but because of unequal access to “the means for such production.”⁷⁵ Trouillot argues that silences enter the process of historical production at the making of the source, the making of the archive, the making of the narrative, and the making of the history.⁷⁶ Lastly, Trouillot truly articulates the way History can be viewed transformatively

⁷¹ Jan M. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 4.

⁷² Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 5.

⁷³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 240.

⁷⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 268.

⁷⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 151.

⁷⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 551.

and without a European lens. He writes that for his father and his uncle, history was an alibi for expressing their love (and disagreements) with each other.⁷⁷

The history of History in America is complex, layered, and fraught with inconsistencies. The history that has been *told* is a history that has been written. Textbooks in the 19th and 20th centuries, textbooks that downplayed enslavement as a mere footnote, or historians which categorized all humans into three distinct races, have done so through the absolute exclusive prioritization of written sources. The irony of the situation is that historians use written sources so often because they want to make history as scientific and accurate as possible. In reality, it has done just the opposite. As demonstrated by Case Study #1, the use of solely written sources allowed Frederick Jackson Turner to produce a pivotal work of American history, one which regarded the American West as “open” and “empty.” This narrative was then incorporated into Native Residential Schools and expanded on even further, to perpetuate the idea that Indigenous Americans had no history and could only *have* history if they adopted the practice of writing history. In Case Study #2, Carter G. Woodson brilliantly exposes the effects of racist and inaccurate curriculum on Black students, by highlighting the ways in which the true history of Black Americans, a history rarely written down, was not incorporated into nationwide state standards. These two case studies are just two of many examples of historical narratives that have been excluded, both because they would affect how Americans saw themselves and others and because they look methodologically different than traditional narratives. As Trouillot stated, “Thus it remains pertinent even if we can imagine a totally scientific history, even if we relegate the historian’s preferences and stakes to a separate, post-descriptive phase. In history, power begins at the source.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 138.

⁷⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, loc 592.

Chapter 2: Broken Treaties: Wampum Belts as Treaty and Historical Preservation

“There’s no such thing as a one-way land bridge...The story depends on who’s telling it.”¹

-Joy Harjo

What Are Wampum Belts and Why Are They So Important?

Wampum belts are one of the best examples of a non-written historical preservation method. Wampum belts are woven strands of white and purple beads made from whelk and quahog clam shells. Wampum shells are found only on the east coast of what is now the United States, specifically in the New England coastal region. Originally, they were strung together using hemp cords.² Wampum belts were largely created by the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*, also known by their French name as the Iroquois, a confederacy of six nations in the Ontario and upstate New York region. Wampum belts serve many functions. As scholar and expert Penelope Myrtle Kelsey wrote, in wampum belts one can:

Specifically recall the original instructions encoded in cultural belts, allude to prophecies recorded, rearticulate their guiding wisdom, provide political commentary on treaty belts that record agreements with settler governments, and continue to honor *Hodinöhsö:ni'* commitment to these nation-to-nation compacts by reciting their record in a wide range of media.³

¹ Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001).; Angela M. Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 4 (2007): 77–100, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.2008.0005>, 97.

² Penelope Myrtle Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum: Essays on Hodinöhsö:ni' Visual Code and Epistemological Recovery*, First paperback edition (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2019), xiii.

³ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xii.

While some white scholars argue that wampum belts were invented as a tool during colonialism, *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens and scholars argue otherwise, with Kelsey writing that they were first created as early as the 14th century to record historical events and treaty agreements.⁴ This debate is largely centered around the use (or lack) of steel drills to create the beads. Some historians argue that wampum beads with very precise holes that appear to be cut with a steel-drill, date the beads. *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens argue that they had their own techniques pre-colonization that allowed for this exact hole to be created, thus disproving the dating criterion.⁵ Wampum belts are political, as they were used by chiefs and clan mothers to record international diplomacy and treaty agreements with neighboring and faraway nations for centuries.⁶

In *Hodinöhsö:ni'* culture, origin stories are extremely important and oftentimes sacred. Whether it is the origin of the earth with the story of *Sky Woman*, or the story of how wampum belts came to be, there is always a reason and a purpose. I feel that it is essential to include the origin story of wampum belts in this chapter. While there are many variations on this story, the one I have chosen includes all of the major themes and concepts that all the stories share:

In *Hodinöhsö:ni'* oral traditions, wampum was originally received by *Ha:yëwënta'* when he lay deep in grief at the side of Tully Lake. *Ha:yëwënta'* had quickly lost his three daughters and his wife to illness and accident in a shocking series of events, and he no longer wanted to carry on living. As he lay on the beach in grief, a large body of birds that had been floating on the waters of the lake arose in flight, and the tremendous force of so many wings drove the water from the lake, revealing the wampum shells on the floor of the lake. *Ha:yëwënta'* picked up the shells and strung them onto cord, repeating

⁴ *What Are Wampum Belts?*, Youtube, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95PojatWRdc>; Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 2019.; In English language text, the spelling Haudenosaunee is the most common. I will be using the spelling *Hodinöhsö:ni'* which is the Seneca spelling because it was asked of me and because it is technically more accurate. It is very important to preserve traditional spellings in languages that are in decline.; Scholars such as Cadwallader Colden and many textbooks argue that wampum belts were used/invented during colonialism.

⁵ William N. Fenton, "The Hiawatha Wampum Belt of the Iroquois League for Peace: A Symbol for the International Congress of Anthropology," in *Men and Cultures*, ed. Anthony F. C. Wallace (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 3–8, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512819526-003>, 4.; William E. Engelbrecht, *Iroquoia: The Development of a Native World*, 1st pbk. ed (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 132.

⁶ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xiii.

to himself ‘This would I do if I found anyone burdened with grief even as I am. I would take these shell strings in my hand and console them. The strings would become words and lift away the darkness with which they are covered. Holding these in my hand, my words would be true.’ *Ha:yëwënta*’ was able to clear his troubled mind and recover from the tremendous loss of his family, thereby allowing him to function as a speaker for the Peacemaker and to bring the message of peace and power to the *Hodinöhsö:ni*’ peoples. His inspiration by wampum and its resulting revelations also created a means by which grieving peoples could assuage their grief without further suffering on their own part or necessitating a ‘mourning war’ to return with captives to take the place of those lost.⁷

It is important for non-*Hodinöhsö:ni*’ historians to situate their research in the origin story of what they are researching because, in *Hodinöhsö:ni*’ way of life, these two cannot be separated. If a historian was to make conclusions about a source or artifact without considering its origin story, their conclusion would be inaccurate. In this story in particular, it is important to acknowledge *Ha:yëwënta*’s statement about the strings becoming words, as well as the mental and spiritual effects it had on *Ha:yëwënta*’. This story shows non-*Hodinöhsö:ni*’ historians that from the very beginning, wampum belts have been more than just a way to preserve history, but also a way to preserve one’s spiritual self. This story cements wampum as sacred.

My three case studies are going to focus on three of the most important *Hodinöhsö:ni*’ wampum belts. My first case study is going to focus on the *Hiawatha Belt* which is the belt that represents the formation of the *Hodinöhsö:ni*’ (*People of the Longhouse*). This belt is so important because it is the belt that symbolized five nations coming together as one. It is also one of the most well-known pre-colonial belts. The *Hiawatha Belt* is iconic. It has been turned into the flag for the *Hodinöhsö:ni*’ nations and is seen throughout the reservations in Ontario and upstate New York. Its symbolism is also transparent at first glance to the viewer. Its deeper meanings, however, are critical to preserve and understand.⁸ The second case study is going to

⁷ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xiii.

⁸ “Hiawatha Belt,” Onondaga Nation, June 18, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/hiawatha-belt/>.

focus on the *Two Row* wampum belt or *Gaswéñdah*. The *Two Row* wampum belt is extremely important for anyone who lives in the Americas, specifically Canada and the U.S. to know about. It is the first treaty between an indigenous nation and a European nation. Not only is it vital in understanding the history of the origins of the U.S., but it is a broken treaty.⁹ Lastly, my third case study will focus on the *Canandaigua Treaty Belt*, also known as the *George Washington Belt*. This belt represents the ratification of one of the earliest treaties the United States ever made in 1794. Freshly after the end of the Revolutionary War, the American government wanted to expand into the West but feared retaliation from nations who lived there. As part of a diplomatic plan, the newly formed American nation and the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* signed the *Canandaigua Treaty*, recognizing each other as sovereign states. This treaty is also critical for Americans not only because of its historical implications but because it is another example of a broken treaty that is still in effect. With increasing calls for reparations or “land back,” it is critical that the U.S. government examines which treaties it has broken.¹⁰ These three wampum belts will hopefully illustrate the complexity of wampum belts as a method of historical preservation, as well as challenge Eurocentric conceptions about interpretations of material culture.

Challenging Eurocentric Conceptualizations of History: Wampum Belts As Historical Evidence

Understanding the history of wampum belts in the context of the United States is extremely important in understanding their role today. In an act of what should be called nothing less than cultural genocide, the federal government and some individual state governments made

⁹ Onondaga Nation, “Two Row Wampum – Gaswéñdah,” Onondaga Nation, February 22, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>.

¹⁰ Onondaga Nation, “George Washington Belt,” Onondaga Nation, February 22, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/george-washington-belt/>.

possession of wampum by *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens illegal in 1899 under many different laws including the “Wampum Law” of section 27 of the New York State Indian Law. These laws were passed not because white Americans wanted to be able to take the belts for themselves and display them in museums (although that did happen), but because they wanted to take away power from *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens, citizens they were threatened by. Wampum belts were and in many ways still are dangerous to white Americans. They serve as mnemonic records that preserve treaties that have been directly violated by the United States government (as will be discussed in Case Study #3). By making it illegal for *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens to possess their wampum belts, they also stripped *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens of their intellectual traditions. Without the possession of wampum belts, intellectual transmission was greatly interrupted, as parents could no longer recite to their children extremely important generational histories. Combined with the boarding school programs, *Hodinöhsö:ni'* youth grow up not only not knowing what their history was, but doubting if they even had a history. The State Museum of New York and the Smithsonian were the two biggest looters of wampum belts during this time period.¹¹

It is important to note that these laws were not symbolic. Actual *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens were arrested for refusing to give up their belts. Chief Irving Powless Jr. recalled dozens of men in the Onondaga nation being arrested and jailed for at least six months for possession of wampum belts.¹² In 1975 a few thousand wampum beads were repatriated back to the Onondaga Nation in part due to the work of Richard W. Hill Sr. and in 1983 a few wampum belts were repatriated to the Onondaga Nation in the first official repatriation of wampum belts.¹³ While

¹¹ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xiv.

¹² Irving Powless and Lesley Forrester, *Who Are These People Anyway?*, First Edition, The Iroquois and Their Neighbors (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 135.

¹³ In many Indigenous circles, the term “repatriate” is used to point to a more profound return, an act of decolonization instead of just a legal decision (repatriate). I used the words that Kelsey decided to use.

hundreds of belts have been returned, there are still many that museums and private collections are refusing to return.¹⁴

From a non-*Hodinöhsö:ni'* perspective, it may be hard to understand how something that looks like just a bunch of beads strung together, can record a long and elaborate treaty or history. Angela Haas, scholar and author of the groundbreaking paper, “Wampum as Hypertext” wrote:

In order to memorize the belt and its story, the trained individual would impress in the mind the visual representation of the belt and subsequently forge mnemonic associations between the visual representation of the belt and the accompanying story. Thus the wampum ‘reader’ or presenter can trace the nodes of information and can link their associated inherited knowledge by tracing the embedded stories ‘told’ by wampum and sinew hypertext.¹⁵

The messages that are preserved in the belts are repeatedly revisited and “reread” by elders and new readers together as Haas describes, in order to make sure that each reader is able to remember the history accurately. Not only are the wampum belts crafted by memory, but they are also “read” by memory.¹⁶ As Kelsey argues, wampum belts are not like alphabetic writing and do not replicate speech. Instead, they serve as a medium of historical preservation that is relevant to the current community, a method of historical preservation that can *only* be “remembered” by a living human community.¹⁷ Chief Irving Powless Jr. of the Beaver Clan of the Onondaga Nation says that “listeners can feel they are present while historical or sacred events are relived in the present moment.”¹⁸

A myth that has been greatly perpetuated in the telling of “Native American” history in the United States is one of passivity and victimhood. A history that has been silenced but *must* be remembered, is the history of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* nations as vitally important allies pre-

¹⁴ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xvii.

¹⁵ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 89.

¹⁶ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 90.

¹⁷ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 33.

¹⁸ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, xii,

Revolutionary War, during the Revolutionary War, and after. Before the Revolutionary War, European powers (mainly the British, French, and Dutch) did everything in their power to create alliances with the nations in the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* confederacy. This is represented in the *Two Line Treaty* in Case Study #2. During the Revolutionary War, the soon-to-be Americans, along with the British, put a lot of effort into recruiting specific nations onto their side. During this time period the British and the “Patriots” were constantly trying to one-up each other by creating elaborate wampum belts, and giving them to the nations as mementos of an alliance. The British and “Patriots” knew how important wampum belts were in treaty-making, and so they used them to try to gather allies. There are dozens of wampum belts from that time period that show the wants of the British and Patriots.¹⁹ Why did the British and “Patriots” want to create alliances with the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* confederacy so badly? The *Hodinöhsö:ni'* Confederacy were skilled diplomats. During all of settler colonial rule, they had been playing the European powers against each other. They also had a large influence over the nations in the Great Lakes region due to the relationships that were built pre-colonization. The Senecas specifically, were known as the “keepers of the Western door,” referring to the western territory of what would become the United States. By including wampum belts in the history of the formation of the United States, a more accurate narrative is displayed, one that shows the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* confederacy not as just victims, but as highly skilled nations who had diplomatic roles.²⁰

Lastly, it is extremely important to elevate the histories preserved by *Hodinöhsö:ni'* wampum belts because many of the historical narratives that are taught to students and available to the public are inaccurate. Textbooks, for example, are a perfect example of where

¹⁹ Gregory Schaaf, *Wampum Belts & Peace Trees: George Morgan, Native Americans, and Revolutionary Diplomacy* (Golden, Colo: Fulcrum Pub, 1990), 29-30, 53, 63-64.

²⁰ While there are many interpretations of wampum belts in the field of literary studies, to my knowledge, this is one of the first historical analyses using wampum as historical evidence.

Hodinöhsö:ni' history is inaccurately preserved. In *U.S. History*, a textbook used in introductory American history courses across the country, the only mention of wampum belts among *Hodinöhsö:ni'* societies says that they were used in ceremonies, as currency, and as jewelry.²¹ *Hodinöhsö:ni'* people today are quick to counter this narrative, explaining that wampum beads were occasionally used as currency and jewelry *post*-colonization, but were most significantly used in wampum belts, something the textbook does not even mention. In a widely circulated U.S. History textbook published online, entitled *U.S. History*, a subchapter for Iroquois history exists, however, it is also extremely lacking and perpetuates inaccurate histories. It says that there was “an unwritten constitution that described these proceedings at least as early as 1590.” The chapter inaccurately and falsely claims that the constitution was created and preserved via oral history.²² The constitution, or the *Hiawatha Belt* as will be described in Case Study #1, is very much a physical object which the textbook completely disregards. Not only are these two textbooks factually incorrect, but they deny readers and learners the possibility of learning about non-written methods of historical preservation as well as the incredibly rich and powerful tradition that is wampum belt creation.

The screenshot shows a textbook page with a blue header and a white main area. On the left, there are three blue-bordered boxes: 'Wampum — Native American Beadwork', 'Haudenosaunee Children's Page', and a social media sharing prompt. The main text is under the heading 'Governance and War' and discusses the Iroquois political system. A yellow highlight is placed over the sentence: 'There was an unwritten constitution that described these proceedings at least as early as 1590.' To the right of the text is a painting of a Mohawk chief in a red cape and white shirt, holding a document. Below the painting is a caption identifying him as Joseph Brant.

Wampum — Native American Beadwork
Beautifully crafted wampum belts were often created to record important agreements. The Hiawatha belt memorialized the union of independent nations under the Iroquois Confederacy. It and several others are pictured here, with annotated links to more information.
[Report broken link](#)

Haudenosaunee Children's Page
Print out one page and create your own Iroquois Paper doll.
[Report broken link](#)

If you like our content, please share it on social media!

Governance and War
Until the 1500s, the five tribes of the Iroquois devoted much energy toward fighting and killing each other. According to **ORAL TRADITION**, it was about this time that they came to their senses and united into a powerful confederation.

The five tribes designed quite an elaborate political system. This included a bicameral (two-house) legislature, much like the British Parliament and modern U.S. Congress. The representatives, or **SACHEMS**, from the **SENECA** and **MOHAWK** tribes met in one house and those of the **ONEIDA** and **CAYUGA** met in the other. The **ONONDAGA** sachems broke ties and had the power to veto decisions made by the others. **There was an unwritten constitution that described these proceedings at least as early as 1590.** Such a complex political arrangement was unknown in Europe at that time.

Mohawk Indian chief Joseph Brant served as a spokesman for his people, a Christian missionary of the Anglican church, and a British military officer during the Revolutionary War.

U.S. History textbook, published in 2014.²³

²¹ P. Scott Corbett et al., *U.S. History*, ed. Sylvie Waskiewicz (Houston, Texas: OpenStax College, 2014).

²² Independence Hall Association, *U.S. History: Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium*, 2009, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/1d.asp>.

²³ Corbett, *U.S. History*, 2014.



Figure 3.15 In this 1681 portrait, the Niantic-Narragansett leader Ninigret wears a combination of European and Native American goods. Which elements of each culture are evident in this portrait?

The abundance of European goods gave rise to new artistic objects. For example, iron awls made the creation of shell beads among the native people of the Eastern Woodlands much easier, and the result was an astonishing increase in the production of wampum, shell beads used in ceremonies and as jewelry and currency. Native peoples had always placed goods in the graves of their departed, and this practice escalated with the arrival of European goods. Archaeologists have found enormous caches of European trade goods in the graves of Native Americans on the East Coast.

U.S. History textbook published online in 2009.²⁴

Case Study #1: *The Hiawatha Wampum Belt: The Origins of the Hodinöhsö:ni'*

The *Hodinöhsö:ni'*, often referred to as the Iroquois Confederacy, is a confederation of originally five, now six, sovereign nations in the Ontario and upstate New York region. It is unclear exactly when this confederacy was formed. Some recent research suggests around 1142 but many *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens claim it has been at least 2,000 years.²⁵ The original five nations of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* include the Mohawk (*Kanyen'kehà:ka*), Oneida (*Oneyoteaka*), Onondaga (*Onoñda'gega'*), Cayuga (*Gayogohó:nq'*), and Seneca (*Onöndowàga*).²⁶ In 1772 the Tuscarora (*Skarù-re?*) joined the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*. Originally living in the region now known as North Carolina, the Tuscarora migrated north to join the confederacy because many of the citizens were being kidnapped and sold into slavery by the British.²⁷ Chief Irving Powless Jr. and many others

²⁴ Independence Hall, *U.S. History*, 2009.

²⁵ Bruce E. Johansen, "Dating the Iroquois Confederacy," *Akwesasne Notes New Series* 1, no. #3 & 4 (Fall 1995): 62–63.; Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 132.

²⁶ Thomas S. Abler, "Kanyen'kehà:Ka (Mohawk)," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, February 7, 2006.; I will be using the English versions/spelling of the nations' names because that is what most members of these nations use in day to day life and in most academic circles. It is still important to make sure that the original names and "spellings" are preserved however.

²⁷ Thomas C. Parramore, "Tuscarora Indians," in *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (NC Pedia, 2006).

argue that the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* are the longest-existing government in the world, existing for over 2,000 years.²⁸ It is also extremely well documented that the U.S. government at the end of the Revolutionary War was heavily inspired by the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*'s structure of government in the creation of the Constitution.²⁹

In a book that Chief Irving Powless Jr. co-authored entitled *Who Are These People Anyway?* Powless explained that fifty leaders from the five nations met in order to form the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*. They decided to call themselves the *People of the Longhouse* to represent a house large enough to contain all five nations. The Seneca became the *keepers of the western door*, the Mohawk became the *people of the flint*, the Cayuga became *the people of the great swamp*, the Oneida became the *people of the standing stone*, and the Onondagas became the *firekeepers*, and the *wampum keepers*. Chief Powless explained that he has carried the name of one of the Onondaga representatives, *Dehatgahdoñs*, of the Beaver Clan. He explained that in the other nations, someone has carried the name of *Thadodaho*, *Honoñwiyehdih*, *Bitter Throat*, and *Hahi-hoñh*, the other key representatives up until the present day.³⁰

Wampum belts as a tool for historical preservation function as a mnemonic device to remember a historical event or treaty. While outsiders can make some interpretations of a wampum belt just by looking at it themselves, the full meaning can only be understood with an oral interpretation by a *Hodinöhsö:ni'* “reader” alongside the physical wampum belt. Below is

²⁸ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 133.

²⁹ Morris K. [D-AZ-2 Rep. Udall, “H.Con.Res.331 - 100th Congress (1987-1988): A Concurrent Resolution to Acknowledge the Contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the Development of the United States Constitution and to Reaffirm the Continuing Government-to-Government Relationship between Indian Tribes and the United States Established in the Constitution.” legislation, October 21, 1988, 10/21/1988, <http://www.congress.gov/>.; I think that historians should be careful in drawing connections between the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*'s government and the U.S. 's because it often does not give enough credit to how democratic the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*' structure is. While the U.S. government may have attempted to achieve a similar structure, they failed in practice.

³⁰ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 133.

the *Hiawatha Belt* and its accompanying interpretation by Seth Newhouse, a Mohawk citizen of the Six Nations Reserve in Canada in 1880. The Belt is 21 ½ inches and is 38 rows wide. It has 6,916 shells and the ends contain buskin thongs, braided on the perimeter. The beads are strung with hemp thread. In 1929 the New York State Museum dated the belt below to at least the middle of the 16th Century. This was confirmed by the fact that the *Hiawatha Belt* was discussed with and perhaps shown to the earliest colonizers. The *Hiawatha Belt* has been recreated every few centuries, but all of the belts represent the original treaty created at the formation of the Confederacy.³¹



Hiawatha Belt, wampum beads, 21 ½ inches and is 38 rows wide, date unknown.³²

The first of the squares on the left represents the Mohawk Nation and its territory; the second square on the left and the one near the heart, represents the Oneida Nation and its territory; the white heart in the middle represents the Onondaga Nation and its territory; and also means that the heart of the Five Nations is single in its loyalty to the Great Peace, that the Great Peace is lodged in the-heart (meaning the Onondaga Confederate Lords), and that the Council Fire is to burn there for the Five Nations, and further, it means that the authority is given to advance the cause of peace whereby hostile nations out of the Confederacy shall cease warfare; the white square to the right of the heart represents the Cayuga Nation and its territory and the fourth and last square represents the Seneca Nation and its territory. White shall here symbolize that no evil or jealous thoughts shall creep into the minds of the lords while in council under the Great Peace. White the emblem of peace, love, charity and equity surrounds and guards the Five

³¹ Noah T. Clarke, *The Thacher Wampum Belts of the New York State Museum*, From the New York State Bulletin 279 Twenty-Second Report of the Director (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1929).

³² Onondaga Nation, "Hiawatha Belt," Onondaga Nation, June 18, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/hiawatha-belt/>.

Nations. In reversing the belt, the figure of the "heart" in the center assumes the appearance of a tree and at the same time brings the geographical position of the Five Nations in the correct order on the belt. A figure of a tree might well represent the Onondaga Nation as the Onondagas were designated to keep the Council Fire and it was under the Great Tree of Light that the nations met in council.³³

The oral interpretation of the wampum belt does a great job of explaining the symbolism and meaning of the belt. This belt is extremely significant to historians in the present for several reasons. For one, it disproves the idea that wampum belts were something made only for treaties with European nations, an idea that many white historians, such as Cadwallader Colden argue to be fact in his book *The History of Five Indian Nations* (published in 1727). While it may seem obvious that wampum belts were made before colonization because of the existence of the *Hiawatha Belt*, resistance from white historians is representative of larger themes of white superiority and the centering of white people in Native history that plagues how Indigenous histories are recorded in mainstream sources.

Secondly, the *Hiawatha Belt* is one of the only *physical* examples in tandem with an oral tradition we have that records a pre-colonial meeting in great detail in this region of the world, an extremely significant meeting at that. It is important to note that stigma and resistance to oral history must be challenged in order to begin to better understand and record pre-colonial oral histories. However having a physical object to accompany an oral history, especially in the region of the northeastern United States is extremely significant. Many historians are quick to claim that oral histories from this long ago will never be accurate. This wampum belt is able to disprove that. As one read's the interpretation of Newhouse, one can easily trace what he is saying to the symbols on the wampum belt. Newhouse describes in great detail what the viewer

³³ William N. Fenton, "The Hiawatha Wampum Belt of the Iroquois League for Peace: A Symbol for the International Congress of Anthropology," in *Men and Cultures*, ed. Anthony F. C. Wallace (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 3–8, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512819526-003>, 6.

is looking at on the wampum belt and brings shapes that may lack meaning to the viewer, to life. The wampum belt acts as a mnemonic device and ensures the accuracy of the oral history.

If non-*Hodinöhsö:ni'* historians were to ignore the use of this belt as a method of historical preservation and as a mnemonic device, the history of the formation of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* would be extremely inaccurate. One of if not the earliest mentions of the formation of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* in Euro-American documents is when Benjamin Franklin referenced the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* model during his Plan of Union at Albany Congress in 1754.³⁴ Up until this point any written coverage of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* looked similar to what biologist John Bartram described in his diary:

“[O]ur six nations [Iroquois] may be now thus characterized: they are a subtle, prudent, and judicious people in their councils, indefatigable, crafty, and revengeful in their wars, the men lazy and indolent at home, the women continual slaves, modest, very loving, and obedient to their husbands.”³⁵

The written documentation that exists of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* in the 18th through early 20th centuries is either blatantly racist or very minimal in detail (such as Franklin’s decision to give credit but no in-depth explanation). It is clear through the written documents that discuss the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* that the true history of the formation of the confederacy would never have been properly documented. Without the creation of the *Hiawatha Belt* and the dedication to keep its history preserved by the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*, the history of the formation of arguably the oldest democracy in the world would have been lost.

³⁴ Terri Hansen, “How the Iroquois Great Law of Peace Shaped U.S. Democracy | Native America,” How the Iroquois Great Law of Peace Shaped U.S. Democracy | Native America, accessed February 4, 2023, <http://nativeamerica.lunchbox.pbs.org/blogs/native-voices/how-the-iroquois-great-law-of-peace-shaped-us-democracy/>.

³⁵ John Bartram, *Observations on the Inhabitants, Climate, Soil, Rivers, Productions, Animals, and Other Matters Worthy of Notice*; (London: Printed for J. Whiston and B. White, 1751), <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/196084>, 61.

Case Study #2: *Two Row Wampum (Gaswéñda)*: The First Treaty Between White Settlers and Indigenous Americans

The *Two Row Wampum*, also called *Gaswéñda*, was the first treaty between Indigenous Americans and white settlers in North America.³⁶ This treaty was created in 1613 due to conflict between the Mohawks and Dutch settlers. Dutch settlers had been encroaching onto Mohawk territory unannounced and cutting down trees in order to make space for houses and farms. A delegation was formed to try to resolve some of the tension that was forming. It was *extremely* difficult for members of both sides of the delegation to communicate with each other but it is assumed that at least one person could semi-communicate with each side. They decided to change the way they greeted each other, as the Dutch had been referring to each other as “father” and the Mohawks as “son.” They finally agreed, after persuasion from the Mohawks to refer to each other as “brother.” After many days of negotiations, a singular treaty was agreed upon but displayed in two completely different ways. While both treaties shared the common principles of friendship, peace, and forever, the Dutch recorded their agreement on paper with three silver chains. This treaty was most likely called the *Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship*. The *Hodinöhsö:ni'* created a wampum belt instead of a written treaty, called the *Two Row Wampum*, as shown below.

³⁶ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xix.; I will be referring to the *Two Row Wampum* as *Two Row* instead of *Gaswéñda* because that is what most *Hodinöhsö:ni'* have done when writing about. Both are considered accurate.; In terms of this being the oldest treaty in North America, there is always a chance that this is not factually true but this is the oldest treaty we have that has been preserved orally and physically. There is no significant protest by any Nation to this fact.



*Two Row Wampum Belt, 1,856 beads, 1613.*³⁷

Below is a recent “reading” from Leroy (Jock) Hill (Cayuga Nation Sub-Chief Bear Clan) of the belt:

Then, the White Man asked what symbol the Ogwého:weh would use as a symbol of what both parties are thinking. The Ogwého:weh said the way we would symbolize our agreement is that we Ogwého:weh have our Canoe, we will put everything we have in our Canoe (language, laws, beliefs, etc . . .). You (White People) also have your ship where your people, your beliefs, your languages, your laws shall be placed. Also between the Canoe and the Ship, we shall have rules of conduct between our peoples. Three principles shall be adhered to between our peoples. 1st—there will be everlasting peace, 2nd—we will maintain a good friendship, 3rd—we will always practice “the Good Mind” (which means mutual respect, justice, and equality). This is how long it is to last: as long as the sun is in motion in the sky. Also for as long as the rivers are flowing. Also for as long as grass is growing on the earth. It means that for as long as the Earth lasts, this is the law that we will follow between our peoples. And after the Dutch probably about one lifespan later, the English outnumbered them, and they took it over. And they said, we think that agreement is good that you made with the Dutch, we’d like also to make the agreement, so our ancestors made the same agreement with the English as well. And that’s when it became an iron chain, and at some point later on after that, they said we’ll make that iron silver now, because iron can rust. If we make it a silver chain between us, that’ll never rust. We’ll just have to keep it clean from time to time, and that means to resolve issues. So this is our method right here; this is our method of resolving issues between the Ogwého:weh and the government of the non-Natives.³⁸

The treaty made with the English that Hill is discussing in his interpretation is the *Treaty of Canandaigua* which will be discussed in Case Study #3. While the wampum belt may look relatively simple to an outsider’s eye, it represents a rich history of acknowledged differences

³⁷ Onondaga Nation, “Two Row Wampum,” 2014.

³⁸ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 1.

and a path forward. The two purple rows running parallel to each other represent two boats.³⁹ One of those boats is a canoe with the ways of life, laws, and people of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*. The other boat is the Dutch ship with its laws, religion, and people. The belt tells us that the boats can travel side by side down the “river of life.” It infers through the lines that do not cross, that each nation will not interfere with the other.⁴⁰ Each group will be able to retain their own “language, culture, spirituality, and ways of being” without forcing their beliefs onto the other group.⁴¹ The *Hodinöhsö:ni'* have a term, *kaswentha*, which described the emphasis on retaining distinct identities while still maintaining peace.⁴² They will coexist next to each other and celebrate the three principles that were agreed upon: friendship, peace, and forever. The last principle of “forever” that both sides agreed to means that the treaty will last forever.⁴³

This treaty was and still is extremely significant for *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens and any non-indigenous people who live in the region now called North America. This treaty is so important to *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens because as Onondaga Faith keeper Oren Lyons said, “it was established for all time to process by which we would associate with our white brethren.” Seneca artist and scholar G. Peter Jemison argues that it is the “basis for all treaties.”⁴⁴ For non-indigenous people who occupy the land stolen by indigenous nations, this treaty holds equal if not more value, despite it almost never being included in school curricula, public discourse, or governmental decisions. This belt counters the narrative that Natives were passive, or that white settlers' new ways of life were pervasive. By creating two rows of an equal amount of white wampum beads,

³⁹ I will be describing the wampum's content in the present tense, as it is considered inaccurate to describe a current treaty in effect in the past tense.

⁴⁰ Onondaga Nation, “Two Row Wampum,” 2014.

⁴¹ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, xix.

⁴² Jon Parmenter, “The Meaning of Kaswentha and the Two Row Wampum Belt in Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) History: Can Indigenous Oral Tradition Be Reconciled with the Documentary Record?,” *Journal of Early American History* 3, no. 1 (2013): 82–109, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18770703-00301005>, 82-85.

⁴³ Onondaga Nation, “Two Row Wampum,” 2014.

⁴⁴ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 2.

the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* are bringing the Dutch “into *their* political economy, and into *their* lands or territories.” In this accurate narrative, the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* are the ones in control, choosing to include the Dutch into their established life. The Dutch can only live on the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* land if they abide by *Hodinöhsö:ni'* rules.⁴⁵ While it is unlikely that the French and English settlers physically inherited the belt, it is understood in the *Treaty of Canandaigua* that the new treaty was an extension of the *Two Row* treaty because *Hodinöhsö:ni'* understood treaties as a “diplomatic continuum.” Every treaty proceeding from the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century involved the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* reciting the principles of the *Two Row* treaty at the start. The Canadian and U.S. authorities stopped incorporating this treaty in their diplomacy at the start of the twentieth century, a time when the “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” philosophy was being perpetuated, even though *Hodinöhsö:ni'* diplomacy still upholds it.⁴⁶

While there is overwhelming evidence on behalf of *Hodinöhsö:ni'*s oral history and material culture to prove that this treaty was created in 1613, some white historians are doubtful. Some historians argue that the Dutch would not have considered this treaty a real treaty, as historian Mark Meuwese claims that Dutch traders did not create treaties with Indigenous peoples in the Americas before 1621.⁴⁷ These concerns are not backed up by Eurocentric forms of historical accreditation though, as written European records “reveal a striking degree of consistency over time in the expression of fundamental principles of the *kaswentha* traditions by

⁴⁵ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 3.; Most wampum belts today are either stored in climate controlled tribal museums or in individual households. Many families are still extremely cautious about telling people about what wampum belts they have because of the history of criminalization that exists. Many historical societies in New York and white private collectors have yet to repatriate the belts as well.

⁴⁶ Irving Powless, G. Peter Jemison, and Anna M. Schein, eds., *Treaty of Canandaigua 1794: 200 Years of Treaty Relations between the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States*, 1st ed (Santa Fe, N.M: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 69-72.; Tehanetorens, *Wampum Belts of the Iroquois* (Summertown, Tenn: Book Pub, 1999).

⁴⁷ Paul Otto and Jaap Jacobs, “Introduction: Historians and the Public Debate about the Past,” *Journal of Early American History* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18770703-00301006>, 5.

Haudenosaunee speakers...” with a written source corroborating the role of *kaswentha* in the seventeenth century in 1689, and a written source mentioning the role of *kaswentha* in 1656.⁴⁸

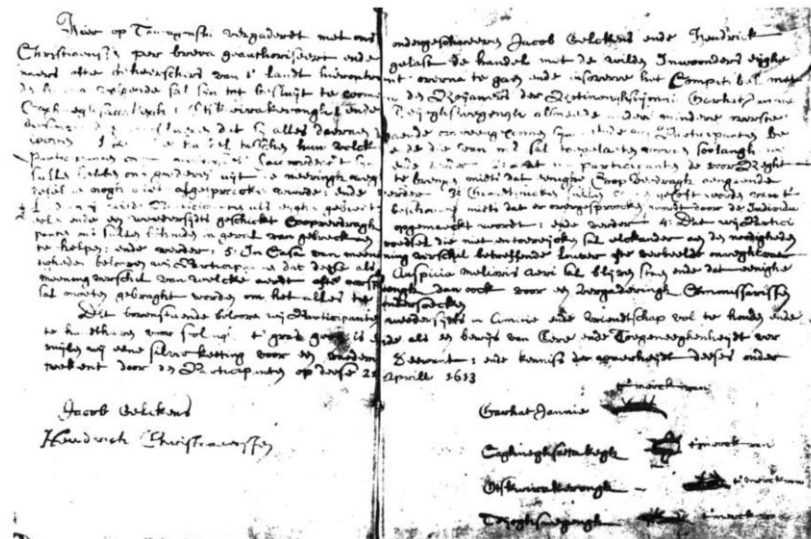
Beyond the written evidence that supports the 1613 date, it is also extremely important for historians, white historians in particular, to listen to Indigenous historians and *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens. Time and time again non-Indigenous historians have been finding scientific evidence to prove what Indigenous historians have been saying for decades. Some historians may feel like there needs to be definitive “proof” that the treaty occurred in that year, but these historians are missing the bigger picture and are disrespecting groups of people that have preserved their history in advanced ways. Non-Indigenous historians, such as those who wrote the inaccurate textbook chapters, must listen to Indigenous historians more and spend more time focusing on historical implications in the present instead of nitpicking dates of the past.

Another reason why the *Two Row* belt is so significant is because the treaty that was written alongside the *Two Row Belt* by the Dutch, the only written evidence that has survived, has been proven to most likely be a fake. This treaty, the *Tawagonshi* document, owned by L.G. van Loon, was introduced to the general public in 1968.⁴⁹ Van Loon, the collector who “introduced” the document to the public has published several bogus documents in the past. In the *Tawagonshi* document specifically, the vocabulary and phraseology did not align with any other seventeenth-century Dutch documents even though it was supposed to have been written in 1313. Also, the names of the “four chiefs” on the documents are place names, not personal names. Historians Charles Gehring and William Starna also argue that the use of the words

⁴⁸ Jon Parmenter, “The Meaning of Kaswentha and the Two Row Wampum Belt in Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) History: Can Indigenous Oral Tradition Be Reconciled with the Documentary Record?,” *Journal of Early American History* 3, no. 1 (2013): 82–109, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18770703-00301005>, 88-89.

⁴⁹ Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, “Revisiting the Fake Tawagonshi Treaty of 1613,” *New York History* 93, no. 1 (2012): 95–101, 96.

“silver chains” was not first documented until 1670.⁵⁰ There was much controversy and contention in the historical community when *New York History* first claimed the document was a fake in 1987. As a whole, the majority of historians agree that it is a fake, however, the dialogue that exists in the historical community surrounding this document raises interesting questions about written evidence being the most “scientific” form of evidence. In the historical community, many historians are quick to dismiss oral history or material culture because of inaccuracies that can exist, whether that is a wrong date, a forgery, or a mixed message. These same issues exist in the written realm, however. There has still been no definitive consensus, no proof per se, that this document is fake or real. Historians can make conclusions based on language and context, but they can not be 100% sure. The same applies to oral history and material culture. Historians must be willing to recognize that History is not an exact science and that the significance of History lies in what we do with what we learn, not in details that cannot be proved.



Tawagonshi Treaty, allegedly created in 1613, courtesy of Wikipedia.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Gehring and Starna, “Revising the Fake,” 97.

⁵¹ “Photo of the Tawagonshi Document (Forged Text of Two Row Wampum Treaty) Included in Otto-Jacobs, 2013, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.Png” (Wikipedia, October 17, 2018), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Photo_of_the_Tawagonshi_Document_%28forged_text_of_Two_Row_Wampum_Treaty%29_included_in_Otto%2E%80%93Jacobs,_2013,_%22Introduction%22,_p._8.png.

The fact that the *Tawagonshi Treaty* is most likely faked proves how essential it is to elevate and preserve the histories preserved by *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens. Without the *Two Row* belt and the oral history preserved alongside it, the first treaty created between European settlers and Indigenous peoples, a treaty that *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens still honor today, and a treaty that arguably still applies to the U.S., would be lost. In most K-12 schools in the country, the first mention of Indigenous peoples in the United States is inaccurate and harmful to Indigenous communities that are alive today. Learning about Columbus civilizing those he encountered, or about the Natives at Thanksgiving who just so conveniently decided to share their food with the Pilgrims in 1621, ignores the diplomatic and powerful role the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* had with Europeans in 1613. The Dutch had to abide by a set of complex and historic rules that the Mohawk agreed upon. The history of the *Two Row* wampum should be one of the first histories taught when students learn about European and Native interaction. Not only because it is historically accurate, but because it portrays the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* as the sovereign and diplomatic alliance of nations they were. Students must also learn this treaty because it is a treaty that the United States has stopped honoring. As will be discussed in Case Study #3, the United States cannot begin to even pretend to care about Indigenous rights if they do not honor the treaties they have violated. Teaching the history of the *Two Row* wampum would be a good first step.

Case Study #3: *Treaty of Canandaigua*: How Americans Benefit and Suffer From Broken Treaties

The *Treaty of Canandaigua*, or the *George Washington Belt*, is the most important and influential treaty between the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* and the United States. Created in 1794 (most likely made by a *Hodinöhsö:ni'* individual who was paid by George Washington), the belt was presented to the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* during the negotiations at Canandaigua, upstate New York, by

George Washington. After the Revolutionary War, the United States sought to expand westward, and fulfill what would come to be called “manifest destiny.” The U.S. government decided to push past the Proclamation Line of 1763, angering Nations who were living there that had been promised protected land by the British. *Little Turtle* of the Miami Nation in present-day Ohio helped lead the defensive front (Western Confederacy), consisting of Miami, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Delaware, and other Nations. In 1790, President Washington sent General Josiah Harmar to the Western Confederacy in order to enforce “U.S. dominance.”⁵² Harmar and Colonel John Hardin ordered their troops to attack but they were no match for the extremely strong Western Confederacy, losing over 200 soldiers and being forced to retreat back east. The Battle of the Wabash, only a year later, holds the highest casualty rate of any battle in the history of the U.S., with a 97% casualty rate among the Americans. 630 of the 930 soldiers died, and 264 were wounded. The Western Confederacy only lost 21 men and only had 40 injuries.⁵³

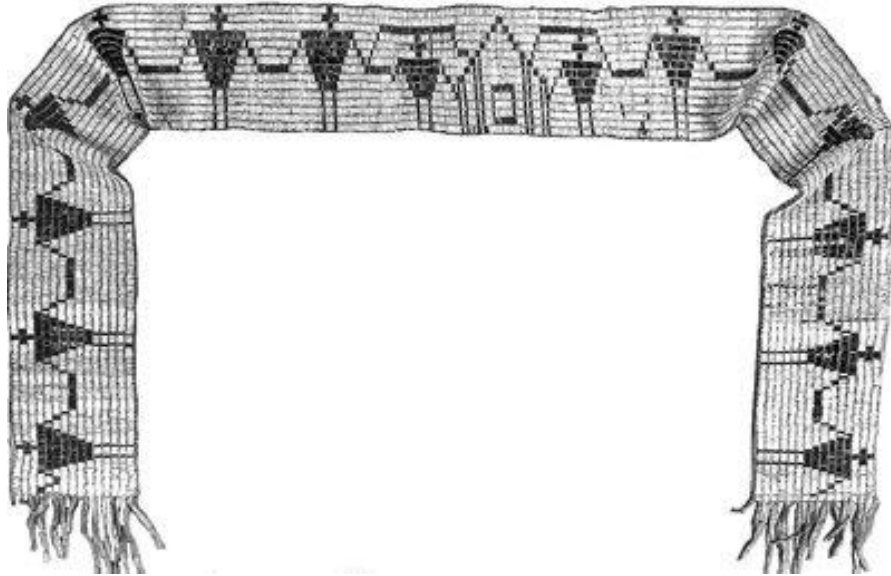
Because of these two losses the United States government decided to try to form an alliance with the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*. Fearing that the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* would align with *Little Turtle* and also needing the expertise of the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*, Timothy Pickering, as appointed by President Washington, began negotiations with the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*, with over 1,600 *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens present.⁵⁴ These negotiations included creating a boundary line between the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* and the U.S. The belt that President Washington had created for this treaty has thirteen figures side by side holding hands, connected to two other figures and a house. The thirteen figures were supposed to represent the newly created thirteen states, and the smaller

⁵² CPN Public Information Office, “Little Turtle’s War and Native America’s Greatest Victory over American Forces,” *Potawatomi.Org* (blog), July 15, 2019, <https://www.potawatomi.org/blog/2019/07/15/little-turtles-war-and-native-americas-greatest-victory-over-american-forces/>.

⁵³ CPN Public Information, “Little Turtle’s,” 2019.

⁵⁴ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 28.

separate figures were *Tadodaho* (chief at the time) and Washington. The connection of hands was supposed to symbolize peace and as the Onondaga Nation states, “The Canandaigua Treaty was created to end the quarrels between us. We agreed that together we shall live forever in peace and in friendship.”⁵⁵



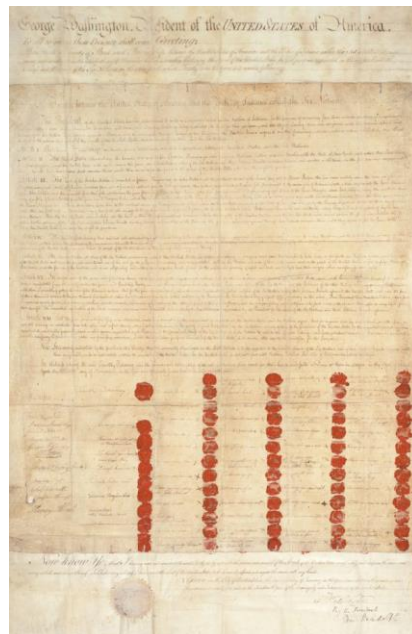
Onondaga Nation, 1794 Canandaigua Treaty Belt (George Washington Belt), 1794, 6 ft long.⁵⁶

The written Canandaigua Belt of 1794 has seven articles. The first Article establishes perpetual peace and friendship between the U.S. and the *Hodinöhsö:ni'*. The second article upholds the land agreements between the Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga Nations with the state of New York. It states that this land (and rivers within) are their property and the United States government cannot disturb or take away the property unless the property is sold to the U.S. government. The third article states the specific property lines of Seneca land (and rivers), and then goes on to state that it belongs only to them and can only be used by non-*Hodinöhsö:ni'*

⁵⁵ Onondaga Nation, “George Washington Belt,” Onondaga Nation, February 22, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/george-washington-belt/>.

⁵⁶ Vita Collections, “1794 Canandaigua Treaty Belt (George Washington Belt),” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://vitacollections.ca/sixnationsarchive/2687019/data>.

people if it is sold. Article Four states that the U.S. government will never disturb or take land away from the previously described Nations. The fifth Article states that the U.S. will have access to a road that runs through the Seneca Nation for traveling and transportation but all *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens will have free and open access to that road. Article Six states that the U.S. government will give the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* four thousand five hundred dollars yearly to aid in buying clothing, domestic animals, and other useful objects. The last article states that no private revenge or retaliation will take place and that peace and friendship will remain unbroken. Reading this treaty, one might wonder how a wampum belt tells more to the viewer than seven explicitly written out Articles. Chief Irving Powless Jr. answers this question, stating that "...if you read about the Canandaigua Treaty, it's on two pages—probably about a page and a half. And there's no way that a page and a half of written language can contain dialogue that went from July to November and what the intent of that treaty was. *But it's in our belts.*"⁵⁷



Onondaga Nation, *The Canandaigua Treaty of 1794*.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 133.

⁵⁸ Onondaga Nation, "George Washington Belt," Onondaga Nation, February 22, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/george-washington-belt/>.

How is the wampum belt more effective in preserving the history of the treaty than the actual written treaty? The proof is in the pudding. The fact that all six *Hodinöhsö:ni'* nations still uphold every Article in the treaty and that the United States has violated every single Article, proves that one method of historical preservation has been more successful than the other in this instance. The United States government has violated the treaty in unimaginable ways. One of the best examples of a violation of this treaty on behalf of the United States government is the construction of the Kinzua Dam. First authorized by Congress in 1936, the Kinzua Dam was built in 1965 with the intent of “flood control and water quality improvement of the Pittsburgh region.”⁵⁹ This project caused the Seneca Nation to lose nine communities (600 citizens lost their homes) and 10,000 acres of the Allegany section of the reservation because of the flooding. Leaders and citizens of the Seneca nation did not approve of this project at all, but their wishes were ignored, and the citizens were not compensated for their loss of land. Houses, gardens, and landmarks were washed away, causing much history to drown with the flooding.

The Seneca Nation did much to try to prevent the dam from being built. They met with civil engineer Arthur E. Morgan who created a plan that would not displace anyone from their homes (diversion to Lake Erie and Conewango Creek) and was cheaper. This plan was smarter and more efficient than the plan proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers. Eleanor Roosevelt was in support of the plan and Johnny Cash released a song called “As Long as the Grass Shall Grow” in support of the Seneca Nation. Morgan’s plan was dismissed however under the guise of it being more expensive. It was unknown at the time, but the plan that the federal government went with, ended up having hydroelectric power built into the dam. Essentially the U.S.

⁵⁹ Maria Diaz-Gonzalez, “The Seneca Nation and the Building of the Kinzua Dam - EHN,” January 30, 2020, <https://www.ehn.org/seneca-nation-kinzua-dam-2644943791.html>.

government chose the destructive plan because they could be making money through hydroelectric power secretly. Not only did this plan displace hundreds of Seneca residents and wipe away historically and spiritually significant land, but it served as a way for the U.S. government to secretly profit off of the land that did not belong to them.⁶⁰ In 2013, the Seneca Nation President Odawi Porter unsuccessfully tried to apply for a U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission license for the Kinzua Dam. FirstEnergy, a for-profit utility company had (and still has) control over the Dam which the Seneca Nation argued violated the “free use of rivers” (Articles Three and Four) extended to them in the Treaty.⁶¹

When I worked at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum, I spoke with dozens of citizens who had been displaced due to this dam’s construction. One person in particular remembered coming home from a friend’s home to see that their house had been set ablaze by local government officials, who had not let anyone in their family grab even one personal memento before burning their house down. The trauma from this project is still felt heavily in the Nation. There was an exhibition at the museum on the history and stories of this project. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this space served as a space not only for historical preservation but for healing.⁶² The surrounding state parks are bittersweet because although they technically protect the land, they are all oriented around the Kinzua reservoir. As a visitor to the area, I went back and forth and talked to many people about whether I should visit the reservoir and surrounding state parks. After much thought, I did decide to visit the area, and as I swam in the rivers and

⁶⁰ Diaz-Gonzalez, “The Seneca Nation,” 2020.

⁶¹ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 30-31.

⁶² If you are interested in learning more about this exhibition you can follow this link <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/ohiyo/rights-pagetechnical-note?t=1535740737747>. This online exhibition is strictly for viewing only and it is against Seneca law to reproduce in any way without explicit permission.

walked alongside the artificial cliffs, I could very clearly feel the presence of the people who had been forced to leave, the histories that had been drowned.

The *Treaty of Canandaigua* was also violated by the United States government when the New York State Thruway was built. The thruway which runs through the width of the state charges people a toll on the road, including *Hodinöhsö:ni'* citizens, which directly violates Article Five of the Treaty. Some may argue that the construction of the Kinzua Dam and the construction of the New York State Thruway are not violations of the Treaty because the U.S. government does not still honor this treaty. This is not factually true. The *Hodinöhsö:ni'* still receive four thousand five hundred dollars (no changes despite inflation) from the U.S. Treasury every year as outlined in Article Six.⁶³ In 1871, the United States government stopped making treaties with Native nations but declared that all existing treaties would remain in effect.⁶⁴ Alongside these two pieces of evidence that prove that the U.S. should legally still be honoring this treaty, the first Article must be remembered. This Article states that “Peace and friendship are hereby firmly established and shall be *perpetual*, between the United States and the Six Nations.”⁶⁵

On one level, it seems like the United States government and non-Native citizens of the U.S. are benefitting by ignoring their responsibilities in this treaty. Chief Irving Powless Jr. has an extremely interesting response to that, however. He argues that President Washington allowed New York state to make treaties with the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* even though it was a constitutional violation (only the federal government can make treaties with another sovereign nation) because he was intent on making the United States an empire. The United States decided to colonize and

⁶³ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 59.

⁶⁴ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 59.

⁶⁵ Onondaga Nation, “The Canandaigua Treaty of 1794,” Onondaga Nation, February 23, 2014, <https://www.onodaganation.org/government/the-canandaigua-treaty-of-1794/>.

occupy the Hawaiian Islands, Puerto Rico, Alaska, the Philippines, and other Pacific Islands because they are an empire and that is what empires do. From the very beginning of this country, the United States was *built* to be an empire. However, Chief Powless argues that this first decision by Washington is going to catch up to this country. He argues that the United States is making the same mistakes as all other collapsed empires of the past by refusing to acknowledge the truths of their own history. Chief Powless argues that Washington's decision to make the United States an empire was actually the very decision that will lead to the eventual collapse of the United States, just like all other empires of the past.

Beyond Writing: How Wampum Belts Ensure the Preservation of History

Chief Irving Powless Jr. stated, "We make wampum belts. And this is our history. So that's what we'll do. And we think that in the future there'll come a time when we will have our belt, but you won't have your piece of paper."⁶⁶ It is clear that wampum belts are an essential part of *Hodinöhsö:ni'* history and way of life. However, wampum belts need to be treated as the historical tool they are by all Americans because of one important reason: we are the other half of the treaty. As described in Case Study #3, the United States made treaties on behalf of America. These treaties have not expired and are still just as valid today as they were three hundred years ago. If non-*Hodinöhsö:ni'* Americans and politicians do not begin to understand wampum belts as treaties we will continue to violate our half of the treaty. Wampum belts also serve as a tool for Indigenous peoples today to deal with the lasting effects of settler colonialism. They can serve as a space for healing, similar to what will be described in Chapters 3, 6, and 7. Kelsey and many others argue that wampum belts not only allow histories to be preserved, but

⁶⁶ Powless and Forrester, *Who are These*, 165.

they provide a space where new traditions that “speak to the contemporary moment and to the future” can be created, in a “distinctly Iroquois way.”⁶⁷



Chiefs of the Six Nations at Brantford, Canada, explaining their wampum belts to Horatio Hale September 14, 1871, courtesy of Six Nations Public Library.⁶⁸

Scholar Angela M. Haas published a groundbreaking and revolutionary article in 2007 entitled “Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice.” While many assume hypertext is something that only applies to computers, the official definition of hypertext by the World Wide Web Consortium is “a text which is not constrained to be linear. Hypertext is text which contains links to other texts.”⁶⁹ In her article, Haas makes the argument that wampum belts should be considered hypertext, and arguably one of the earlier examples of hypertext. She argues that this is the case because wampum belts have, “extended human memories of inherent knowledges through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associated storage and retrieval methods.”⁷⁰ As historical narratives in wampum belts are maintained through “re-‘reading’” them through community

⁶⁷ Kelsey, *Reading the Wampum*, 110.

⁶⁸ Horatio Hale, “Chiefs of the Six Nations at Brantford, Canada, Explaining Their Wampum Belts to Horatio Hale September 14, 1871.,” accessed February 11, 2023, <https://vitacollections.ca/sixnationsarchive/2688456/data>.

⁶⁹ “What Is Hypertext?,” accessed February 11, 2023, <https://www.w3.org/WhatIs.html>.

⁷⁰ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 77.

memory performance, nonlinear designs “with associative message storage and retrieval methods” are constantly being accessed.⁷¹ In traditional conceptions of hypertext, nodes, or points of information that provide pathways to create links of information, are organized into what are called “informational structures.” In wampum belts, the beads serve as the nodes, and the stringing and pattern serve as the links or pathways to connect the nodes. Haas writes that “wampum hypertext constructs an architectural mnemonic system of knowledge making and memory recollection through bead placement, proximity, balance, and color.”⁷²

Wampum belts also serve as a unique and useful form of hypertext because they encourage continuous civic engagement and lessen the need for technology.⁷³ Native peoples in the United States are often stereotyped as people from the past, people who did not have advanced technology, and people who did not record their histories. This idea of wampum as hypertext disproves all of these stereotypes. It instead argues that wampum belts were one of the most advanced methods of historical preservation in the world, something that computers mirror today. Wampum belts are not only significant because they preserve treaties and histories, but because the *way* in which they preserve history is in many ways more effective and advanced than written evidence.

While Chief Powless might be right about the United States in the long term, in the present moment non-*Hodinöhsö:ni'* Americans are benefitting from the broken treaty. In present-day conversations of reparations and “land back,” it is crucial that Americans become educated on the treaties the United States government has violated. Re-honoring these treaties is the first step, in a long process of reparations and land back. This looks like ensuring *Hodinöhsö:ni'*

⁷¹ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 80-81.

⁷² Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 86.

⁷³ Haas, “Wampum as Hypertext,” 93.

citizens don't have to pay anything to the federal government when they are on their land or traveling in between. This means that 100% of profits from the last fifty-eight years of the Kinzua Dam need to be paid in full to the Seneca Nation, along with an openly-funded project to do to the dam what the Seneca Nation chooses. This looks like teaching all three of the treaties described in the chapter in every single classroom in every single state. This looks like rewriting textbooks that portray Natives as passive, as victims, and as people from the past and instead telling their true histories with their own forms of historical preservation at the center. This looks like ensuring every single historical society that still illegally owns a wampum belt is charged criminally, and that any *Hodinöhsö:ni'* person who was arrested for owning one in the past is honored as a hero today. This looks like adding even more clauses to NAGPRA to ensure that it is actually enforced and that all Native Nations have 100% control of their histories. This looks like giving each nation in the *Hodinöhsö:ni'* their own passport and allowing them to travel internationally with it. These are all the *first* steps that must be taken to start the process of reparations and land back. As Mississaugas of Alderville First Nation elder Maurice Switzer explained, "For Europeans, a treaty marked the end of a relationship but for Native people, it marked the beginning."⁷⁴ Non-Native Americans should take a page out of the Native playbook, and create a new beginning by honoring the treaties of the past.

⁷⁴ *What Are Wampum Belts?*, Youtube, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95PojatWRdc>.

Chapter 3: Quilts as ‘Fabric Griots’: African American Women Quilting Their Own Histories with Their Own Hands

“It is essential to resist the depiction of history as the work of heroic individuals in order for people today to recognize their potential agency as a part of an ever-expanding community of struggle.”¹

-Angela Davis

The Inaccurate “Folk Art” Relegation of African American Quilting

The origins of quilting in the United States are highly contested. Many white quilt historians such as Robert Shaw claim that the first quilts created in the United States were “elegant decorative bed covers crafted by upper-class [white] women.”² Shaw and other white quilt historians argue that *if* enslaved women made quilts, they were made out of necessity and were not artistic or historic, despite countless accounts from Black women for centuries (and dozens of surviving quilts) describing quilts their ancestors made during the time of enslavement.³ Robert Shaw’s book, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007* is one of the most widely accepted overviews of quilt history in the United States, yet it contains extremely problematic and borderline racist conclusions. Shaw opens up one chapter by writing, “As was the case with African Americans and Hawaiians, Native Americans learned quiltmaking through contact with whites.” While there is countless evidence to suggest the role of patchwork quiltmaking in Africa, Shaw like many others, continue to argue that Europeans and white Americans taught “others” how to quilt.⁴ Not only is this statement factually incorrect but it

¹ Angela Y. Davis and Frank Barat, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016).

² Robert Shaw, *American Quilts: The Democratic Art, 1780-2007* (New York, NY: Sterling, 2009), 20.

³ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 106.

⁴ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 184.

perpetuates a narrative of colonialism. It perpetuates the idea that “contact” with whites was a peaceful occurrence, where white people were gracious enough to share their craft.

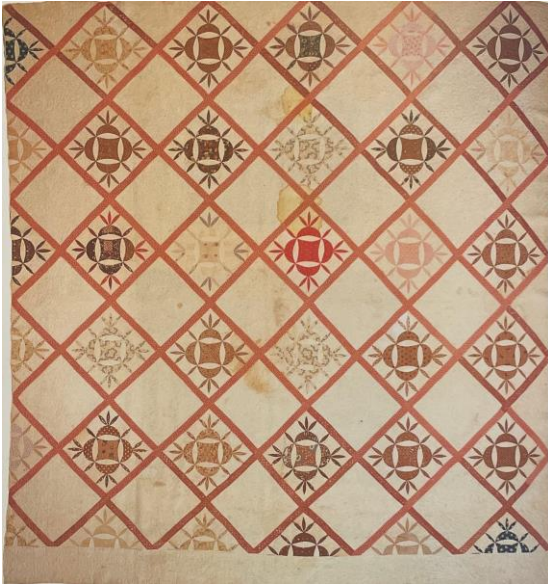
It is important to examine how and when “Quilting” became considered a topic worthy of academic exploration. With the rise of Second Wave feminism came increasing calls to treat quilt making as a scholarly discipline, despite gender and class bias, along with its “Folk Art” label.⁵ While African American quilts and American quilts more broadly are now accepted as Folk Art and occasionally Folk History, this relegation is problematic. While there is nothing wrong inherently with including quilts within the Folk Studies field, it allows historians in the mainstream to cast aside quilts as a form of historical evidence. It allows historians to continue to value and use written evidence as the most scientific form of evidence and ignore the fact that quilts are just as historic, significant, and helpful as written evidence. The idea that quilts might have some significance as art, but not as history, is extremely problematic. Historians *must* reexamine what they categorize to be within the field of Folk Studies. It is not a coincidence that the vast majority of research conducted on African American quilting has come from Black woman historians. If the possibility that more written documentation by enslaved people survived existed, white historians would be quick to jump on board. The fact that little research (aside from the tireless work of Black quilt historians) has been done to explore the potential possibility of surviving quilts from the time of enslavement is extremely indicative of how white historians view quilts as a source. Reimagining what historical evidence looks like is the only way to include the voices of people who have been marginalized.

I have decided to focus this chapter on protest quilts from the 1970s to the 1990s in my first case study and the quilts of Gee’s Bend in rural Alabama during the 20th Century in my

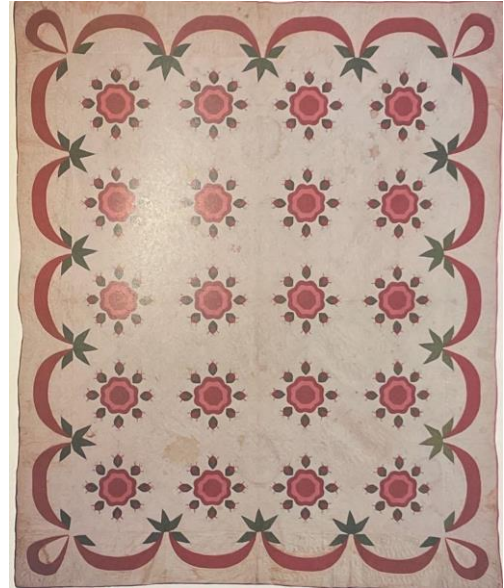
⁵ Benberry, *Always There*, 14, 19.

second. While there is much written and oral documentation to suggest that enslaved women created quilts largely for practical reasons, there is also evidence to suggest that they created quilts to record histories and stories following in the tradition of their ancestors.⁶ Because of the inherent nature of quilts, both the tactical (use of lye soap to clean them) and perceptual (not seen as artistic or historical) many historians have concluded that quilts created by enslaved women before the Civil War do not exist today. This is objectively false, as dozens of quilts were created by enslaved women that have survived, such as the two shown below. Why is it that so many historians say these quilts do not exist? It is important to note that quilts have only just recently been seen as a form of evidence worthy of historical research. Combining the lack of effort mainstream historians have exerted to track down these quilts, along with the historical distrust that has been created and perpetuated by white historians and Black women, might explain why many of these quilts have not been “found.” While most of the quilts created before the Civil War did not survive, quilts that celebrate the same themes created by enslaved women, but contextualized under different circumstances exist today. The protest quilts from the 1970s through the 1990s that are highlighted in Case Study #1 are historical in two ways. They record specific events in a medium that allows people of the present to remember the event via the lens of someone who experienced it. They are also historical though because they represent a tradition that survived the throes of kidnapping, genocide, and enslavement, a tradition that has evolved to serve as a medium to preserve history in the present.

⁶ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 69.



Enslaved labor, *Reel Quilt* (also called *Star Quilt* by owner), cotton pieced, 113 x 104 inches, 1844.⁷



Enslaved labor, *Original Whig Rose Quilt*, cotton, appliqued, pieced, 102 x 82 inches, 1860.⁸

My second Case Study focuses on the quilts made by the women of Gee's Bend in the 20th Century. The quilts created by Black women in Gee's Bend, an extremely rural and isolated community in Alabama, are arguably the most praised and preserved quilts created by African American women in the 20th Century. While not disagreeing with the magnitude of their artistic importance, less effort has been put into understanding these quilts as historical evidence. While these quilts represent an entirely unique and groundbreaking art form, they also tell the stories of individual Black women in a community almost completely shut off from the rest of the country. Both of the case studies make the argument that quilts function as historical evidence on many levels. Quilts preserve historical events in the moment, they preserve traditions from before

⁷ Enslaved labor, *Reel Quilt (Also Called Star Quilt by Owner)*, 1844, Cotton pieced, 113 x 104 inches, 1844, Plantation in Sedalia, Missouri.

⁸ Enslaved labor, *Original Whig Rose Quilt*, c 1860, cotton, appliqued, pieced, 102 x 82 12 inches, c 1860.

enslavement, and perhaps most importantly, allow Black women to preserve their own histories with their own hands.

The Origins of “American Quilting”

The origins of the practice of quilt-making are very controversial among historians. There is evidence that ancient Egyptian robes contained quilting techniques, and an Egyptian canopy from 980 B.C.E. was made using quilting techniques. The quilting technique used for this canopy, called *piecing*, has also been found in India in the eighth century as well as in Ancient China at a similar time. There is also an Egyptian preserved ivory carving that displays a king wrapped in what most experts have come to agree is a woven and patterned cloth. While many experts originally assumed it was painted leather, “The designs were carved with such plasticity that even the under-and-over intertwining of the strips in the guilloche bands can still be seen. The effect strongly suggests woven designs in a heavy fabric, rather than painting on leather, as has sometimes been suggested.”⁹ While quilting (*pieced*, *appliqué*, and *whole cloth*) can be found all over the world, Black quilt historians argue that African American quilts have unique “aesthetic principles” which distinguish them from past traditions.¹⁰¹¹



The Ivory King, c. 3000 BCE, Ivory, Height: 8.90 centimeters.

⁹ Object: *The Ivory King*, ca 3000 BCE, Ivory, Height 8.80 centimeters, The British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA37996.

¹⁰ Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (Atlanta, Ga.: Tinwood Books, 2002), 26.

¹¹ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 10.

What could be categorized as the antecedent of African American quilting started over two thousand years ago in the Niger River in Mali, after the domestication of cotton. There are four civilizations in West and Central Africa that are most represented in African American folk art today. These civilizations include the *Mande*-speaking people (modern countries of Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso), the *Yoruba* and *Fon* peoples (modern countries of Benin and Nigeria), the *Ejagham* peoples (modern countries of Nigeria and Cameroon), and the *Kongo* and *Kongo*-influenced peoples (modern countries of the Republic of Congo and Angola). The distinct tradition of African American quilts that was created in the U.S. was directly influenced by these four civilizations, along with traditions adopted and adapted from Brasil, Suriname, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, and other Caribbean islands. It is also important to note that in many of the civilizations listed above in Africa, men had been the ones to create quilts. It was largely due to the division of labor created by Euro-American men in the United States, that African and African American women took on the role of quilt makers.¹²

In African American quilts, *piecing*, when strips of fabric are combined, is seen as the dominant technique. In West Africa, strips of cloth were used for millennia as currency or for more practical functions such as clothing. When African women were kidnapped and brought to the United States, they turned to what was familiar and used strips to create quilts.¹³ Another technique used by African American women in ways dissimilar to Euro-American quilts was their use of *appliqué*, or sewing cut-out shapes onto the surface of the quilt.¹⁴ While Euro-

¹² Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 25.

¹³ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 29-31.

¹⁴ It is important to note the complexity of the term Euro-American that I use in this chapter to describe certain quilt traditions. While this term is heavily used by quilt historians, expert and historian Cuesta Benberry argues that the term is problematic because it eliminates the role that African American women had in creating the tradition that is called the "American patchwork quilt." When I use the term in the chapter, I am referring to the style practiced by white Americans, but I am not making the argument that this style was *only* created by white women.

American women used *appliqué* primarily for decorative purposes, many African American women continued a long tradition of using *appliqué* to tell stories and record histories. The practice of using *appliqué* to preserve histories is extremely well documented in Western and Central African civilizations.¹⁵

It is extremely important to understand the role of quilts in African cultures, specifically the role in cultures that make up large percentages of kidnapped and enslaved Africans, in order to understand the role of quilts in African American circles. As historian Bill Arnett wrote:

Every great quilt, whether it be a patchwork, appliqué, or strip quilt, is a potential Rosetta stone. Quilts represent one of the most highly evolved systems of writing in the New World. Every combination of colors, every juxtaposition or intersection of line and form, every pattern, traditional or idiosyncratic, contain data that can be imparted in some form or another to anyone.¹⁶

Arnett is highlighting the fact that quilts are not only a significant form of “writing” or historical preservation in the “New World,” but one of the most “evolved systems of writing in the New World.” Expanding beyond the artistic value of quilts, Arnett elevates the idea that quilts also serve a significant historical function as well.

When African American quilts first started being studied in academia as a distinct tradition in the 1970s, art historian Maude Wahlman tentatively identified what she at the time thought were seven traits that distinguished African American quilts from Euro-American quilts. These traits included vertical strips, bright colors, large designs, asymmetry, improvisation, multiple patterning, and symbolic form. Art historians and art dealers were quick to use this criterion as a way to verify and commodify African American quilts. Trailblazer and leader of African American quilt history Cuesta Benberry clarified that these traits should not be used to

¹⁵ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 69.

¹⁶ Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, 1. Anchor ed (New York: Doubleday a division of Random House, Inc., 2000), 8-9.

verify or label if a quilt is legitimate or created by an African American woman. However, it was hard to undo the limited image of African American quilts that had been created.¹⁷

Because of this criterion suggested by Wahlman and thus circulated by art dealers, many African American quilts that did not fit this criterion were thrown out or bought at extremely low prices. The quilt history community is still trying to recover from the loss created by this problematic framework and to undo in the public consciousness this limited conception. It was Black quiltmakers and Black quilt historians who fought against this framework.¹⁸ In a study conducted by the Women of Color Quilters Network, it was found that only 2% of their members quilted in the framework that was so widely accepted.¹⁹ They also questioned how stereotypes around Black people and the exotification of Black people had shaped this framework. They argued that Black quilt makers as individuals need to be listened to and honored and that a simplistic framework to identify quilts would never be accurate.²⁰ As many Black scholars have argued, “the authentic history of African American quilts reflects the same diversity in style, form, aesthetics, and technique, as the African American people who make them.”²¹ This will be clearly demonstrated in Case Study #2, or the quilts of Gee’s Bend.

By using quilts as historical evidence, historians are able to both highlight the role of African Americans in creating American history, while also legitimizing the African American experience through acknowledging the artistic and historical value of quilts.²² As historian John Blassingame described, “Because of his traditional fascination with the written word, the

¹⁷ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 7.

¹⁸ Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992), 15-16.

¹⁹ Carolyn Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African-American Quilts*, 1st ed (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1998), 14.

²⁰ Benberry, *Always There*, 15-16.

²¹ Carolyn Mazloomi, *And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2015), 10.

²² Mazloomi, *And Still We Rise*, 6.

American historian when confronted with oral lore...has no methodological tools applicable to them....” It is so important to look at material culture as a tool of historical preservation because material culture often preserves ideas that cannot be put into words or concepts that are deemed too important by certain cultures to be put into speech or writing. This is very much the case with concepts around religious signs and charm traditions that have been passed down from African cultures to African Americans.²³ While enslaved Africans came from all over Western and Central Africa, from cultures that spoke different languages and practiced different religions, almost all of these cultures shared the common element of practicing oral traditions.²⁴

In the 1930s under the New Deal, the Federal Writers’ Project was created by the Works Progress Administration. Under this project, many formerly enslaved people were interviewed and described their experiences being enslaved and the traditions they were able to preserve while they were enslaved. While many of these testimonies highlight the significance of quilt-making and prove the presence of quilts among enslaved women, these interviews were also sometimes problematic due to the positionality of the interviewers, causing biases in what was recorded.²⁵ That is why it is so important to turn to material culture like quilts to learn about the true experiences of enslavement. Quilts are almost always created by an individual and do not rely on white people to record what they are trying to say.

Challenging Historical Empiricism: The Quilts of the Underground Railroad

It would be remiss of me if I did not briefly touch upon the controversy of the Underground Railroad Code Quilts, as documented in *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of*

²³ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 85.

²⁴ Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 2.

²⁵ Benberry, *Always There*, 21.

Quilts and the Underground Railroad. Hidden in Plain View tells the story of the chance encounter between the author, Jacqueline L. Tobin, and quilter Ozella McDaniel Williams in a market in Charleston, South Carolina. The book recounts the story of Ozella, who described how her ancestors would create quilts with secret codes to aid with escape in the Underground Railroad. Certain symbols such as the “bear paw,” “monkey wrench,” or “log cabin” would signal to enslaved people when and how to leave, and what directions to follow. Ozella explained to Tobin that these quilts would be hung up on a clothesline or on the side of a fence, and would be a way to secretly communicate with those who were attempting to leave. While this book became a national hit when it was first published, featured by Oprah, included in some textbooks and museums, and even written about in a children's book, valid criticism from historians soon followed. Tobin and co-author Raymond G. Dobard based the whole book, the whole quilt code, on the story and quilts of a singular individual, Ozella. Historian David Blight called the story “a piece of folklore largely invented in the 1990s which only reinforces a soft, happier version of the history of slavery.”²⁶

In an article written by Seamus H. Flynn, Flynn analyzes the complexities that arise when historians claim to only adhere to “factual accuracy.” Flynn argues that adherence to factual accuracy can function as its own dogma.²⁷ Historian Laurel Horton writes that “we do not recognize in our own emotional reactions [to unsubstantiated belief] evidence that we too are acting from a set of deeply held beliefs... in the supremacy of factual truth.”²⁸ Flynn also features Saidiya Hartman who argues that “factual” historic documentation is not objective, and

²⁶ Noam Cohen, “In Douglass Tribute, Slave Folklore and Fact Collide,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2007, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/23/nyregion/23quilt.html>.

²⁷ Seamus H. Flynn, “Code Quilts – Objects as Texts,” May 4, 2018, <https://blogs.brown.edu/amst-0191e-s01-2018-spring/2018/05/04/code-quilts/>.

²⁸ Laurel Horton, “The Underground Railroad Quilt Code: The Experience of Belief,” *Uncoverings*, The Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group, 28 (2007): 207–16.

is actually biased towards the “romantic fantasies of the teller.”²⁹ She argues that “there is no historical document that is not...a vehicle of power and domination.”³⁰ Historians Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker argue that quilts are an “instance of the only legitimate tradition of ‘the people’ that exists.”³¹ As Flynn argues, those who claim to only follow “proven, archived data” still impose their own beliefs and values onto the evidence.³² I do not think that historians and the general public should accept the story told by Tobin and Dobard at face value. Much needs to be done to avoid an oversimplification and “feel good-ification” of the story of enslavement and the Underground Railroad. However, I do think that the criticism that the book received is in many ways indicative of a larger issue with how historians approach sources and objectivity. There has been no documented effort by historians to systematically seek out quilts that might support this theory. A middle ground needs to be found, where historians do not claim that one type of evidence is more “scientific than the other” while still making sure that these histories that have been silenced for so long are allowed to be spoken.

Case Study #1: Quilts as Protest: How Black Women Used Quilts to Fight for Liberation

Like all sources, quilts cannot be separated from the context that they were created in. Quilts especially, however, represent an act of resistance, sometimes in content, sometimes in theme, and always in form. Protest quilts, or quilts that comment on historical events and movements, are becoming more well-known and accessible to the general public. It is extremely important when examining these quilts, that the multiple facets of resistance that the quilts

²⁹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

³⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.

³¹ Olga Idriss Davis, “The Rhetoric of Quilts: Creating Identity in African-American Children’s Literature,” *African American Review* 32, no. 1 (1998): 67–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042269>, 67.

³² Flynn, “Code Quilts,” 2018.

represent are considered. Quilting was something deemed a woman's responsibility in the "New World," along with the tasks of raising a family and taking care of the home. Poor women *had* to quilt in order to keep their families warm. However as living conditions have improved and white patriarchal gender norms have shifted, women have continued to quilt. This is because quilting serves so many more purposes beyond practicality.

Black women specifically have been able to turn a medium forced upon them, into something they can use for their own personal liberation. Black women since the time of enslavement have been using quilts to tell their stories and to speak out against the oppression they faced. At the start of the 20th Century, these protest quilts became even more overt in what they were protesting against, serving as markers in the Black Freedom Struggle. This was largely due to the role of the Black church. Women started creating quilts to memorialize their churches at the turn of the 20th Century, to help record who the pastors and members of the church were. In the mid-20th Century, Black churches served as a central location for Civil Rights organizing, and the women at these churches started using their existing methods of quilting to discuss issues that were happening outside of the church. Some of these first "protest quilts" in the church setting memorialized Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass.³³ Along with the role of Black churches, some African American quilters were inspired by the Black Arts Movement that started in 1965. In this movement, Black artists reflected their cultural pride in various artistic forms in an attempt to "awaken Black consciousness and achieve liberation."³⁴ This case study is going to examine a select few of these quilts created by Black women, focusing on quilts that preserve a moment in history in a unique way due to their form. This case study is not claiming

³³ Benberry, *Always There*, 58.

³⁴ Hannah Foster, "The Black Arts Movement (1965-1975)," *Blackpast* (blog), March 21, 2014, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-arts-movement-1965-1975/>.

that these quilts are the most “historically significant” but is rather arguing that these quilts provide new interpretations of history that are not as easily found in written evidence.

The quilt below, entitled *One Nation*, was created by quilter Virginia R. Harris in 1996 in response to Attorney General Janet Reno’s statement about the string of church burnings in the South. In 1996, over 30 Black Southern churches were burned to the ground in just the span of 18 months.³⁵ Federal investigators were called in to investigate eventually, led by Attorney General Janet Reno and a task force made up of the Treasury and Justice Departments. The investigation conducted by Reno and the task force was criticized heavily by victims of the attacks, as investigators used lie-detector tests on church members, subpoenaed church records, and told congregations that “everyone is a suspect.”³⁶ It was Reno’s initial claim that there was no evidence that the fires were “racially motivated” along with the aggressive investigations towards the church members that caused quilter Virginia R. Harris to create the quilt shown below.³⁷ In a *New York Times* article, the subtitles state: “link between eight cases in Alabama and Tennessee is considered” and “looking for racism in the shadows surrounding arson.”³⁸ The way this article (and many others were phrased) was extremely problematic for victims of the attack, who saw that these attacks were *clearly* racially motivated and clearly connected.

³⁵ “CNN - Church Fires: Reno to Meet with Ministers - June 9, 1996,” accessed January 4, 2023, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9606/09/church.fires/index.html>.

³⁶ Brown, Jennifer. “Reno Defends Fire Probe.” *New Bedford Standard-Times*, June 10, 1996. <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/nation-world/1996/06/10/reno-defends-fire-probe/50635367007/>.

³⁷ Carolyn Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African-American Quilts*, 1st ed (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1998), 111.

³⁸ Ronald Smothers, “Black Church Fires Are Under U.S. Review,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 1996.



Virginia R. Harris, *One Nation*, cotton, beads, embroidery, 49 x 39 inches, 1996.³⁹



New York Times article published on January 20, 1996.⁴⁰

In the quilt, a cross is placed at the center and embroidered with orange thread, representing burning. The cross separates overt racism and covert racism. On the left is the example of overt racism, which so many are quick to denounce in the present. There are members of the KKK watching the lynching of a Black soldier. On the right side is the more

³⁹ Virginia R. Harris, *One Nation*, 1996, cotton, beads, embroidery, 49 x 39 inches, 1996, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

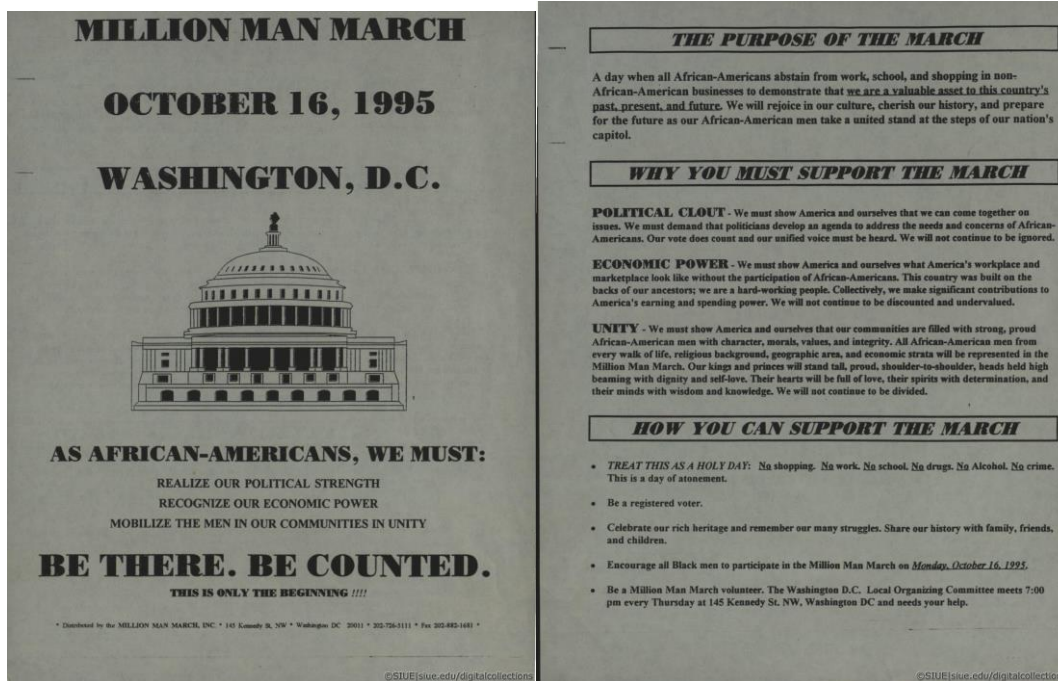
⁴⁰ Ronald Smothers, "Black Church Fires Are Under U.S. Review," *The New York Times*, January 20, 1996.

covert representation of racism (modern to the time the quilt was made). The KKK is represented on the right side in more covert clothing, perhaps the uniform of a U.S. soldier. Their white faces are small and hard to see, and the only direct visual link to their KKK alignment. They are watching the church burn with gasoline canisters at their feet. The top and bottom border say “One Nation, Under God” highlighting the irony of the idea of “One Nation” when there are clearly two very different experiences, along with showing the irony of “under God” by displaying the burning cross at the center. While members of the churches that were burned expressed their frustrations with the way the arson was investigated, Virginia Harris went even beyond that and visually represented the continuation of racism in the United States. It is one thing to talk about the similarities between racism in the past and the present but to do what Harris did with her quilt, leaves an unforgettable image in the viewer's head.

Another example of a quilt that preserves a historical event in a distinct and unique way is the *Million Man March Quilt*. The Million Man March was a massive gathering of Black American men in Washington D.C., on October 16, 1995. Created by the controversial cleric Louis Farrakhan and led by many organizations such as the National African American Leadership Summit, civil rights activists, and the Nation of Islam, the march was created to “convey to the world a vastly different picture of the Black male.”⁴¹ The flyers that were distributed across the country are displayed below. The march received some backlash at the time due to Farrankhan’s homophobic statements which made Black gay men feel conflicted on whether to come or not, along with the march’s exclusion of Black women (although Black women did organize a nearby march called the *Day of Absence* and organized the Million

⁴¹ Don Terry, “Black March Stirs Passion and Protests,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1995, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/08/us/black-march-stirs-passion-and-protests.html>.

Woman March two years later).⁴² Despite its controversy, however, the march was extremely significant for many Black Americans, with over 400,000 attendees and thousands of Black Americans not going to work and school that day.⁴³



Flyers distributed by my Million Man March Inc. ahead of March in 1995.⁴⁴

Because of its initial exclusion of women, the quilt displayed below is even more historically significant. The quilter, Aline V. Moyler stated that she specifically created the quilt so that its “significance would not be lost in future years.” Through the patches, the quilt portrays an image of Muslims and Christians together in harmony, Black and Brown figures from various backgrounds coming together (corporate and blue collar), and it shows Black men who were victimized by the prison industrial system through the failures of the nation’s education systems.

⁴² Charles M. Blow, “Opinion | Million Man March, 20 Years On,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2015, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/opinion/million-man-march-20-years-on.html>.

⁴³ “Million Man March » Center for Remote Sensing » Boston University,” October 12, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171012211519/http://www.bu.edu/remotesensing/research/completed/million-man-march/>.

⁴⁴ Million Man March Inc., “Million Man March’ Flyer,” 1995, Redmond Collection, https://www.siue.edu/lovejoy-library/tas/MMM_exhibit_p4.htm.

Moyler also decided to only show half of the Capitol, since many Black Americans feel that the government only represents half of Americans. The pyramid represents dollars and the cowrie shells symbolize the tradition of passing on one's gifts. The tears symbolize the camaraderie of one brother to another. She also attached a zipper pouch that contained the mission statement of the organizers of the march (shown above as well). On one side of the Reflecting Pool, Moyler represents the spirits of the men who could not attend, and on the other, she represents all the Black men that have died leading up to this moment.⁴⁵



Aline V. Moyler, *Million Man March Quilt*, cotton, blends, 60x80 inches, 1996.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Carolyn Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African-American Quilts*, 1st ed (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1998), 101.

⁴⁶ Aline V. Moyler, *Million Man March Quilt*, 1996, cotton, blends, 60 x 80 inches, 1996, Mount Vernon, New York.

Moyler's interpretation of the March is unique and extremely important. To her, the march represents more than just a gathering for men to convey a different picture of themselves but rather represents the historical roots of anti-Black racism in the country. A big theme that can be interpreted from this quilt is unity, something that many don't associate with the march in the current context of the present. Moyler wanted to preserve the march as a representation of the meeting of the past and the present, a meeting of Christians and Muslims, and a meeting of Black men from all different backgrounds. Her quilt provides us with more information than we could get from just photographs or newspaper articles. It gives the viewer a sense of hope, a sense of harmony, and a visual representation of all of the "patchworks" that make up Black liberation in the United States.

Arguably the most well-known protest quilt is the *Freedom Quilt*, created by Jessie Bell Williams Telfair. Telfair created this quilt in the mid-1970s, after being fired from her job as a cafeteria worker after registering to vote. Telfair, who was living and working in a small community in Parrott Georgia, was inspired to register to vote due to the activism of SNCC, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC had been targeting Southwest Georgia specifically due to the low numbers of Black voters registered. Telfair created two of these quilts, one that is now in possession of the American Folk Art Museum in New York and the other in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.⁴⁷ It is important to note that both of these institutions are art museums, despite the historical significance of this quilt and its commentary on how democracy functioned in the 70s, and in many ways how it still functions today. Using the colors of the American flag, Telfair repeats each letter in its own block. While the letters

⁴⁷ NMAAHC, "Freedom Quilt," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed January 5, 2023, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2017.40.

might look identical, on further inspection the letters are actually all slightly different, representing the various degrees of freedom Americans experience.



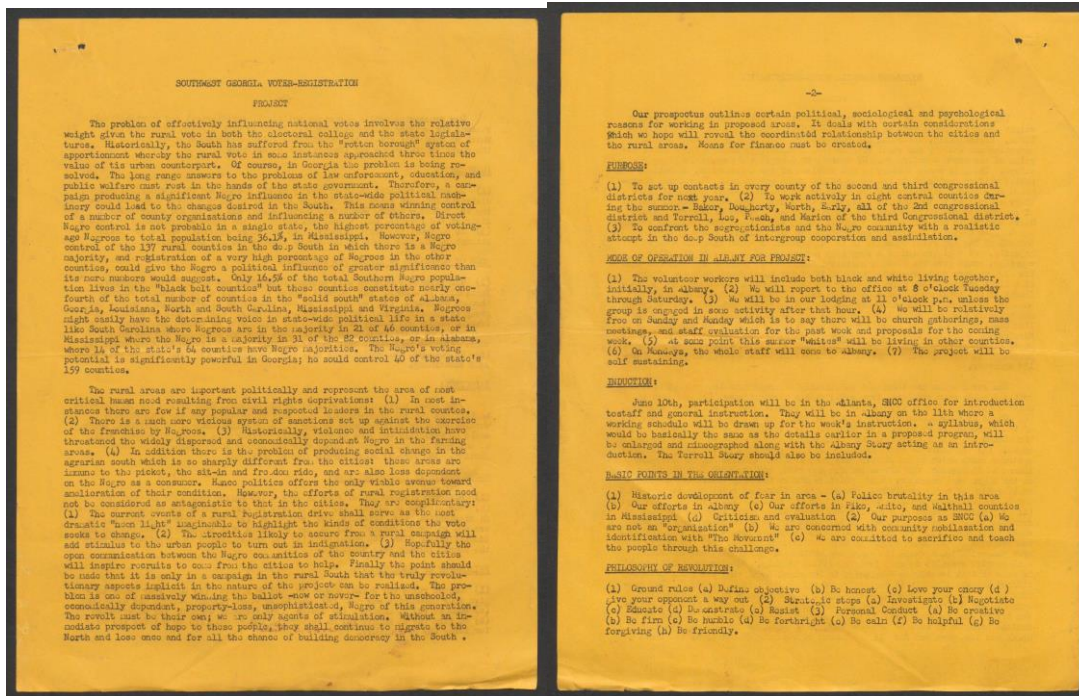
Jessie Telfair, "Freedom Quilt," cotton, 73 x 87 inches, c 1975.⁴⁸

There are dozens of written documents still preserved that detail the specific steps that members of SNCC made to target eligible Black voters in Southwest Georgia. SNCC had determined that this area where Telfair lived represented "the area of most critical human need resulting from civil rights deprivations."⁴⁹ The county that Telfair lived in was nicknamed "Terrible Terrel" because of the level of oppression that existed in a predominantly Black population. There was a lot of organizing and planning that went into canvassing. SNCC members went door to door and talked with people, arranged meetings to teach people how to pass literacy tests, and built strong bonds with community members by centralizing their efforts

⁴⁸ Jessie Bell Williams Telfair, *Freedom Quilt*, c 1975, Cotton, 73 x 87 inches, c 1975, National Museum of African American History and Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2017.40.

⁴⁹ "Voter Registration Expands in Southwest Georgia," *SNCC Digital Gateway* (blog), accessed January 5, 2023, <https://snccdigital.org/events/voter-registration-expands-southwest-georgia/>.

in Black churches. The following is a document summarizing the goals of the Southwest Georgia Voter-Registration Project.⁵⁰



The first two pages of an information packet distributed to SNCC members for a voter registration project in southwest Georgia.⁵¹

This document is a clear example of written evidence that has been preserved documenting the plans of SNCC for this specific project targeting Southwest Georgia. What about what happened after though? What happened to the individuals that SNCC worked with after they left Georgia? There are few if any sources that exist in the public sphere that document the experiences of everyday-Georgian residents who registered to vote (or attempted to vote) after SNCC left. This information is extremely important though because it not only documents the new ways in which Black Georgians were prevented from voting after SNCC left but also because of Georgia's current citation with voter suppression. Without truly learning about what

⁵⁰ "Voter Registration Expands in Southwest Georgia," *SNCC Digital Gateway* (blog), accessed January 5, 2023, <https://snccdigital.org/events/voter-registration-expands-southwest-georgia/>.

⁵¹ SNCC, "Southwest Georgia Voter-Registration Project," 1963, Faith Holsaert Papers, <https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/r4697044d>.

happened in the past, Georgia and the U.S. as a whole cannot begin to attempt to fix the mistakes that plague our current “democracy.” Telfair’s quilt shows us many things. It reminds us that it is not as simple as going into a community, helping people to register to vote, and then leaving. In a system set up to prevent Black people from having political agency, there are going to be a multitude of ways to prevent Black people from voting and from having freedom. Telfair’s quilt reminds us of the complexity of *freedom* in a singular quilt.

Case Study #2: The Women of Gee’s Bend: Preventing the Over-Generalization of Black Women’s History Through Quilts

The Gee’s Bend quilts and the women who crafted them are not just the most well-known quilts created by African American women today, but the quilts arguably created their own art style, a style comparable to cubism or impressionism in its magnitude. The quilts created by the women of Gee’s Bend are one of the few (if only) examples of quilts created by African American women that were able to bridge the gap between Folk Art and Fine Art, being displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Smithsonian, and the Brooklyn Museum.⁵² While these quilts have been celebrated and praised for their artistic value, not as much exploration has been done to investigate what *histories* these quilts preserve. These quilts serve as a tool for historical preservation in many facets. They tell the history of the development of a new artistic style, completely isolated from the rest of the country. They tell the history of what women had access to, what they needed to do for their families, and how. Perhaps most importantly though, they tell the stories of individuals, they tell the unique and distinct stories of everyday Black women living in Gee’s Bend.

⁵² John Beardsley et al., eds., *Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, 1st ed (Atlanta, Ga. : Houston: Tinwood Books ; Museum of Fine Arts, 2002), 9.

Gee's Bend is a place like no other. Officially named Boykin, Gee's Bend is situated southwest of Selma Alabama, tucked in between the bend (a loop shape) of the Alabama River. Due to its geographical location, Gee's Bend was and still is extremely isolated. The land of Gee's Bend was originally a plantation under the slaveowner Joseph Gee but was sold to another slaveowner, Mark H. Pettway, in 1845. After the Civil War, many of the descendants of the originally enslaved people on Gee's plantation were forced by circumstance to remain on the land as sharecroppers. For the next half-century, life was very difficult for the residents of Gee's Bend and poverty only increased the isolation. In the 1930s, a Camden merchant foreclosed on many of the residents, causing utter chaos and even more extreme poverty. Gee's Bend became one of the poorest towns in the United States, causing the federal government (Farm Security Administration) to intervene under New Deal policies. They piloted a project called "Gee's Bend Farms," which was a cooperative program where individual families could buy plots of land from the government and eventually buy back their land with reasonable payments. This caused Gee's Bend to be one of the first communities where land was largely owned by the Black (and some Native) residents who lived there.⁵³

Because of this unique economic situation in tandem with its geographical isolation, Gee's Bend remained almost entirely Black and extremely isolated from the outside world until the 1960s. It was not until the 1960s when the Freedom Quilting Bee was established, that the incredible quilts created by the women of the town were introduced to the eyes of the outside world and the art market. The Freedom Quilting Bee was part of a larger movement of cooperatives created by Black women in Alabama to sell their quilts and generate income for their families. After Father Francis X Walter, showed some of the quilts to his friends up North,

⁵³ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 22.

Black women in Alabama realized that they could actually sustain their families through the tradition they had all been practicing for decades. The Freedom Quilting Bee's name was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., who had marched through Gee's Bend on his way to Montgomery, inspiring 900 of the residents to register to vote.⁵⁴ While the Freedom Quilting Bee gave many women in Gee's Bend new economic freedom, it also caused quilters to have to restrict their creative goals, in order to fit in with what was being demanded.⁵⁵ While the quilts created for the Freedom Quilting Bee are historically significant in their own right, this chapter will focus on quilts that were created distinctly of any third party.

One way in which the quilts of Gee's Bend are historic is in how they reveal the living conditions when the quilts were made. Expert John Beardsley argues that the prevalence of quilting "correlated exactly with the condition of the housing." Before the federal government's intervention that drastically improved the standard of living in Gee's Bend, housing was rudimentary at best. Quilts were created as a necessity in Gee's Bend, to fill in the cracks of rickety houses, to cover beds containing six children at a time, and to allow for a nursery to even function. The practical function of quilts is one of (but arguably not the only) reasons why the women in Gee's Bend took to quilting as much as they did.⁵⁶ After the Farm Security Administration intervened and families were able to purchase land plots and pay back the government in increments, conditions started improving. During this (slight) increase in living conditions, quilting did not phase out. Quilting transitioned to serve other roles. Quilting came to serve as a way for young girls to transition into womanhood, symbolized "practicality

⁵⁴ "Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy Selects Renowned Montgomery Architecture Firm to Revitalize Building Which Was the Pillar of the Regional Quilt Economy," January 17, 2022.

⁵⁵ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 33.

⁵⁶ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 28.

and survival,” and became a symbol of “procreation and nurture.” Quilting became a way for individual women to express themselves despite their shared hardships and conditions.⁵⁷



Annie Mae Young, “Bars” Work-Clothes Quilt, Denim, corduroy, cotton/ polyester blend, 108x76 inches, c 1970.⁵⁸ This is an example of a “work clothes quilt” or a quilt made using the work clothes of the husbands of the quilters because of their accessibility and durability.

Another unique situation created by this pilot scheme was the women were able to hold on to their land after their husbands died. This allowed for multiple generations of women to remain in the same place, something extremely rare for the time and something that facilitated the passed-down practice of quilting.⁵⁹ As William and Paul Arnett argue, quilts serve as a self-portrait. While each woman quilted unique quilts, certain continuities could be seen through generations. It is both the continuities and the differences that are so valuable to historians.⁶⁰ The three quilts below are made by three family members and all feature the same *star* pattern: Ella

⁵⁷ Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women* 41.

⁵⁸ Annie Mae Young, “Bars” Work-Clothes Quilt, c 1970, Denim, corduroy, cotton/polyester blend, 108 x 76 inches, c 1970, Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/annie-mae-young/work/bars-work-clothes-quilt>.

⁵⁹ Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women*, 40.

⁶⁰ Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women*, 41.

Mae Irby, her daughter Linda Diane Bennett, and her niece Stella Mae Pettway. Ella Mae Irby was the daughter of a famous quilter, Delia Bennett, who was also known for her *star* quilts. The *star* pattern was not adopted by all quilters in Gee’s Bend. The pattern was vulnerable to puckering and pulling unless crafted by an expert. Because of that, the *star* patterns are seen in the most prevalent quilting families, the Pettway’s and Ella May Irby’s families being the two most famous families. The three quilts below share the core similarities of the *star* pattern, however, their composition is significantly different.⁶¹



Ella Mae Irby, “Texas Star,” cotton, corduroy, cotton blend, 88 x 85 inches, 1973.⁶²



Linda Dianne Bennett, “Star” variation, cotton blends, 90 x 90 inches, 1973.⁶³



Stella Mae Pettway, “Star” variation, “The Big Eight,” polyester/cotton blend and polyester double knit, 86 x 86 inches, c 1985.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women*, 164.

⁶² Ella Mae Irby, *Texas Star*, 1973, Cotton, corduroy, cotton blend, 88 x 85 inches, 1973, Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/ella-mae-irby/work/texas-star>.

⁶³ Linda Diane Bennett, *Star Variation*, 1973, Cotton, polyester, cotton blends, 90 x 90 inches, 1973, Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/linda-diane-bennett/work/star-variation>.

⁶⁴ Stella Mae Pettway, “*Star*” Variation (Quiltmaker’s Name: “*The Big Eight*”), c 1985, Polyester/cotton blend and polyester double knit, 86 x 86 inches, c 1985, Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/stella-mae-pettway/work/star-variation-quiltmakers-name-big-eight>.

Ella Mae's quilt is distinguished by its rich color palette, Linda Diane's quilt is categorized by its dramatic fabric contrasts, and Stella Mae's by its embrace of both rich color and dramatic fabric contrast. It is clear that Stella and Linda were heavily influenced by Ella's quilting, however, their quilts also stand alone. Introducing multi-checkerboard piecing, while still including the diamond piecing that her mother made, creates a great distinction and causes the viewer to question the choice of the checkerboard fabrics and placement. Stella's more simplistic approach is representative of the style her generation was adopting while embracing a traditional color pattern and pattern tradition.⁶⁵

Another significant example of a collection of quilts within a family is the Pettways. The Pettways are one of the most well-known families among the Gee's Bend quilters.⁶⁶ The four quilts below are all examples of *housetop* quilts by members of the Pettway families. As described by Souls Grown Deep, a foundation created to promote the work of Black artists from the South and support racial justice and advancement, the *housetop* pattern was one of the most prevalent patterns in Gee's Bend. The *housetop* pattern reflects the larger tradition of African American "call and response" in music. Souls Grown Deep and quilt scholars argue that the *housetop* pattern is an "attitude, an approach toward form and construction." *Housetop* patterns are started with a solid cloth or pieced motif to anchor the quilt. Rectangular strips of cloth are joined together so that the ends of the strip's long side connect to the short side of a neighboring strip. This forms a frame around the central patch. Each of the four quilts below (done by three different quilters) looks entirely different to the new eye. The color schemes are different, the dimensions are different, and the layout of the *housetops* varies significantly. However each of

⁶⁵ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 168-169.

⁶⁶ Rita Mae Pettway is one of the only quilters from Gee's Bend who still makes quilts today.

these quilts follows the same general pattern, and when examined closely, evokes a sense of familiarity.⁶⁷



Annie E. Pettway, “Housetop”-nine block variations, cotton, 77 x 71 inches, 1930s.⁶⁸



Rita Mae Pettway, “Housetop” medallion, cotton and corduroy, 72 x 76 inches, 1974.⁶⁹



Rita Mae Pettway, “Housetop”- twelve-block variation, cotton/polyester blend, corduroy, 84 x 70 inches, c 1975.⁷⁰



Louisiana P. Bendolph, “Housetop” medallion, cotton and synthetic household furnishing fabric, 78 x 78 inches, c 1975.⁷¹

All three of the women who crafted the quilts above lived in the *Sodom* neighborhood. In Gee’s Bend, the neighborhoods corresponded to the quarters of old farming communities. Most people lived in their neighborhood for generations, only moving occasionally in the instance of marriage. Because of that, certain quilting styles became distinct to certain neighborhoods.⁷²

Brown’s Quarters, *White’s Quarters*, *Rehoboth*, *Over the Creek*, and *Hotel* are all neighborhoods

⁶⁷ Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women*, 308.

⁶⁸ Annie E. Pettway, “Housetop”—*Nine-Block Variation*, 1930s, Cotton, 77 x 71 inches, 1930s, Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/annie-e-pettway/work/housetop%E2%80%9494nine-block-variation>.

⁶⁹ Rita Mae Pettway, “Housetop” *Medallion*, 1974, Cotton and corduroy, 72 x 76 inches, 1974, *Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*.

⁷⁰ Rita Mae Pettway, “Housetop”—*Twelve-Block “Half-Log Cabin” Variation*, n.d., Cotton, cotton/polyester blend, corduroy, 84 x 70 inches, n.d., Souls Grown Deep, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/rita-mae-pettway/work/housetop%E2%80%9494twelve-block-half-log-cabin-variation>.

⁷¹ Louisiana P. Bendolph, “Housetop” *Medallion*, c 1975, Cotton and synthetic household furnishing fabric, 78 x 78 inches, c 1975, Souls Grown Deep.

⁷² Beardsley, *Gee’s Bend: The Women*, 44.

with distinct quilting styles and cultural practices.⁷³ The *housetop* pattern became a dialect distinct to the *Sodom* neighborhood, to the Pettway family. Looking at the four quilts above organized in chronological order, the evolution is clear, but so is the distinctness of each artist. Annie's quilt is more monotone in color, representing the fact that this quilt was made in 1930, before the government program that would drastically change Gee's Bend. The fabrics in the quilt represent everyday fabrics that she had access to, and the uniformity of the patterning reflects the fact that Annie was working all day in the field and taking care of all of her children.⁷⁴

The next quilt is Rita's, the granddaughter of Annie (and raised by Annie). This quilt is from 1974 and represents Rita's distinct style of mixing pastels with bright reds. Rita's quilt represents the transition towards quilting for artistic reasons and not just utilitarian needs. She describes that although she learned the *housetop* pattern from her grandmother, she had access to quilting frames and would sit down to work on them at the end of the day. Because of this, she was able to use more types of fabrics and had access to certain colors that were not found in fabrics laying around the house. Rita is also known for her distinct style of quilting because of her mixture of patterns and her combinations of colors. She formed a unique style that allowed her work to be distinctly "Rita" in the art market.⁷⁵ The fourth quilt is Louisiana's, daughter of Rita. Her quilt reflects a continuity of her mother's and grandmother's but is also once again, distinct in style. Louisiana describes that when she first started quilting she had to use the scraps she found around the house. As time went on, she was able to also select fabrics that represented her own artistic integrity and use them with the scraps she found at home, separating herself

⁷³ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 214.

⁷⁴ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 44.

⁷⁵ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 308-313.

from her grandmother and mother. This is represented by her use of both cotton fabric she selected because of its aesthetic value, combined with household material she found at home.⁷⁶

The quilts displayed above all reveal information about the histories of their creators. However, these quilts are not only historically significant as evidence because of their physical form but also because they serve as a catalyst for the preservation of oral history. The women who run Souls Grown Deep along with quilt historians featured in *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts* conducted dozens of extensive interviews with quilters in Gee's Bend. Using one or two quilts as a catalyst, historians were able to contextualize the creation of the quilts into the lives of the women who made them. Louisiana P. Bendolph is one of many women whose oral history was recorded. In her oral history transcription, Louisiana contextualizes important life moments with her quilting:

I wish that I could put into words how life was back then. Seeing the school bus go down the road while we were picking cotton and the other kids seeing us picking cotton made me feel like I should have been on that bus. We really weren't allowed to have much fun when I was growing up. About the only thing I did when I was young to have fun was play softball and make quilts. My brother and sister and I would play under the quilts while my mother (Rita Mae, who we all call Rabbit), Annie E. (who we called Mama), my Aunt Mary (who we called Edie), and my Aunt Nellie would quilt. I remember doing that when I was six or seven years old, but I'm sure we did it earlier than that. We would sit under the quilt and I would watch the needle going in and out of the fabric. I loved watching and playing under the quilts.⁷⁷

In 1973, my brother Hank Snow Pettway was born. And he was also an albino child. That meant that Chris had someone to look at and say, 'He looks like me.' They would always ask why they looked different from us. We really didn't understand it back then and didn't know what to say. That was just the way God made them. Whenever a baby was born, Rabbit would make some baby quilts for them. It was kind of like a tradition. New babies meant new baby quilts. I was making quilts back then, too.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ "Louisiana P. Bendolph," Bio, About, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/louisiana-p-bendolph>.

⁷⁷ "Louisiana P. Bendolph," Bio, About, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/louisiana-p-bendolph>.

⁷⁸ "Louisiana P. Bendolph," Bio, About, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/louisiana-p-bendolph>.

Most of my quilts are made from cotton and cotton-poly blends. I sew new material, but sometimes I use old and leftover material, which is how I learned to piece. For my new material I go to the fabric store. Sometimes I have the quilt designed in my head and sometimes I'll draw it out. When I go to the store, I already know what colors I want. Sometimes I'll go to the store just to look at the colors. I see the colors and then I'll work backwards with the color coming first. Most of my quilts are really based on the "Housetop" design. But once I start working on them, they get "un-Housetop." I started with "Housetops." I never really thought about "Housetops" as my favorite, but they always start out that way. Many times they don't really end up looking like a "Housetop" unless you stand back and look at them. Then you can see that it is based on the 'Housetop.' There are lots of ways to make a "Housetop." They look simple until you start working with them. I've just started a new generation of "Housetops."⁷⁹

Each of these sections represents a completely different time in Louisiana's life but is contextualized by her quilt-making. A lot can be learned about Louisiana's life and life and for women in Gee's Bend through this oral history. Louisiana discussed the emotional pain she experienced from being forced to pick cotton while other students were able to attend school, an experience not uncommon for young girls in Gee's Bend. Louisiana also explains the familial aspect of making quilts and the "fun" connotation she was able to create, something her grandmother probably did not experience. Contextualized in the common experience of creating a quilt for a baby, Louisiana describes her unique experience dealing with the prejudice her brother faced being born albino. Lastly, Louisiana talks about how her style of *housetop* came to be. She acknowledges the influence of the *housetop* pattern in her design but also attests to what she did differently as an individual. If Louisiana had never created such artistically significant quilts, her oral history would almost definitely never have been recorded. Much can be learned about life for women in Gee's Bend at the time, but the powerful story of Louisiana's own life is also recorded, a luxury usually only granted to the educated or to the women who made the covers of newspapers.

⁷⁹ "Louisiana P. Bendolph," Bio, About, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/louisiana-p-bendolph>.

When students learn about the Civil Rights Era, they mainly focus on figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. These activists are taught in schools not necessarily because their lives are more “historically-valuable” than the average Black women in Alabama perse, but because their history was preserved in writing, in newspapers, in books, and in speeches. This in turn has created a paradox that makes it seem like their histories are intrinsically more valuable than the history of an “average, everyday” person. This is not the case, however. Black women all across the South made decisions just as brave and just as calculated as Rosa Parks, however, these women are not remembered because their histories are not usually preserved in writing. That is why the quilts of Gee’s Bend are so exciting. These quilts allow the histories, the narratives, and the choices of women who were not privileged enough to have a national platform to tell their stories. Not only is this critical in creating a more complex and diverse understanding of the Black Freedom Struggle, but it makes the narrative more accurate as well. By allowing more voices to be heard, historians can prevent the overgeneralization of Black American history that has conveniently evaded white Americans.

It is so important to record and learn these individual histories because it prevents what historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich deems the “myth of the homespun” from forming. The “myth of the homespun” is the idea that historical perceptions of farmers plowing, women sewing and canning, and children playing on the streets of their neighborhood can mask the difficult realities that rural people experienced.⁸⁰ The individual stories of these quilts prevent a sweeping romanticization from occurring. The beauty of the quilts comes from the resistance the women displayed against the horrifying circumstances that existed in rural life, not because of rural life in itself. The quilts of Gee’s Bend represent the power of kinship and female ownership, but they

⁸⁰ John Demos, “The Stuff of Legend,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2001, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/11/books/the-stuff-of-legend.html>.

also represent how there is no one story. History can often lead to over-generalization, but the quilts of Gee's Bend counter that. Every woman, every quilt, and every history is different.

Reclaiming a Relegated Craft: How Black Women Crafted and Preserved Their Own Histories Through Quilting

M. Joan Lintault, a pioneer in the quilting community, once made a joke that quiltmaking might be the “greatest mass movement nobody ever heard of.”⁸¹ This is not far from the truth. Quilts have been relegated to the discipline of Art, and the field of Folk Art at that. The reason why quilts are not used as evidence by most historians in the United States can be understood by looking at who the very first quilters in the U.S. were: enslaved Black women. Quilts are most often created by women, usually poor women, and are created privately in the sphere of the home. Quilts oftentimes serve a practical purpose, they keep families warm and they shield children from the harsh realities of the outside world. All of these variables are not compatible with the criteria historians use to determine what historical evidence is. This is an extreme misjudgment of the historical community however and counters the increase in calls from the public to diversify the voices represented in historical narratives. Many historians are finding themselves stuck. They are struggling to tell the histories of the people who have been the most marginalized: Black women, Native women, queer people, and poor people to name just a few.

While white historians have been frantically trying to find written sources that tell the histories of people who were denied the ability to write, quilt historians are finally getting their chance to come out from the Folk Studies closet they've been shoved into and shout, “We are here!” While there is nothing inherently wrong with labeling and creating “subtypes” in History, such as Folk Studies, historians must actively fight to make sure that the information preserved

⁸¹ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 334.

in Folk Studies makes its way out into the greater narrative. It is not coincidental that there is “Women's History,” “Queer History,” and “Folk Studies,” but nothing called “White Men’s History.” In the process of expanding whose voices are represented in History, we must expand on what sources are considered historical. Quilts are not just pieces of art, they are snapshots in time, snapshots into the minds of women who had their own distinct thoughts and opinions just like their husbands. They are also snapshots into the minds of individuals, something essential in ensuring history is accurate and representative.

Many of the narratives that are taught in history classrooms in K-12 schools around the country about slavery are written from either the perspective of white abolitionists or exceptional enslaved people who managed to escape, such as Frederick Douglass. That is not to say that the voices of figures such as Frederick Douglass are not important in learning about the history of enslavement in the United States. These exceptional voices are extremely important because they can represent the voices of people who were denied a platform to share their experiences. However, it is just as important to hear the voices of the people who were denied a platform *directly*. How can that be done though, when enslaved people were actively denied the ability to learn to read and write, to organize themselves, and to speak freely? That is why it is so important that historians turn towards less traditional sources, such as material culture and oral traditions to hear the individual stories of enslaved people. As W. E. B. DuBois wrote,

“Although the slave system in the United States has been studied as thoroughly as any institution of modern times, until recently few scholars have examined the testimony of its black victims. Presumably they were considered too unobservant, too subjective, and their views too poorly expressed to be of much value to the historian or sociologist. For the longest time the intellectual arbiters of the slave system were those who profited from it, their friends and their relatives.”⁸²

⁸² Benberry, *Always There*, 21.

Another reason why historians must begin to incorporate material culture as evidence more is because of the fact that the average American is more “pictorially and multi-media focused, particularly when it comes to acquiring knowledge about others.”⁸³ If historians want American students to be able to learn about more diverse histories, they must reflect on the most effective way to achieve that.

It is extremely important to reanalyze what has been considered fact when it comes to American quilt history. The disparities that exist between books entitled “Quilting History” (inferring white quilt history as the default) and “Black Quilting History” are immense. There needs to be a massive effort on the part of historians, art historians, and scientists to explore the origins of American patchwork quilting and determine where the credit is due. This also involves rebuilding trust in communities that have been historically exploited and robbed, and working past the temptation to neatly categorize certain quilt characteristics. The automatic assumption to cast aside an idea or narrative due to a lack of sources needs to be challenged, and the effort needs to rest instead on outreach and communication with the public. If Black women are going to feel safe enough to come forward and share their family’s quilts, many of which have priceless historical information, then quilting needs to be recognized for what it is: an invaluable form of art and historical preservation that is essential to the country’s history.

Alivia Wardlaw, the art scholar responsible for creating the exhibition that made the Gee’s Bend quilts so well known nationally included a profound anonymous quote in a piece she wrote about the women and their quilts of Gee’s Bend. The quote says:

Here is my testimony, here is my emblem of me is what these quilts say. No one quite like me. My quilts are the answer to Du Bois’s question that haunts black people: ‘Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house?’ So that I can wrestle down this house and then raise it up on my shoulders and carry it away with me to the

⁸³ Mazloomi, *And Still We Rise*, 6.

center of my self where my creative spirit flows and I will adorn my house with my own cloths from my spirit and my heart...these are my quilts, my creations.⁸⁴

Wardlaw argues that, unlike a painting that can be put on an easel, a quilt cannot be put aside and worked on the next time the woman has free time. Quilts are created while braiding the hair of children while tending to crops and consoling husbands. The emotions that are felt in everyday life are translated into the quilts. Despite everything going on in their lives, the women in Gee's Bend were able to make something bright and unique, something often contextualized by tragedy yet miraculous in form.⁸⁵

The information preserved in quilts must not be forgotten, as their uses are not just relevant to understanding the past but in understanding the present. Many of the themes displayed in the quilts from this chapter are as relevant today as they were when the quilts were created. Many quilters argue that quilts circles can serve as a space for healing, similar to *testimonios* as described in Chapter 7 and community exhibitions as described in Chapter 6.⁸⁶ Some experts argue that quilting circles could have been the first feminist consciousness-raising group.⁸⁷ Quilt circles can serve as a space for Black womanhood to be affirmed or celebrated, something not allowed in mainstream American circles. Quilting more broadly allows women to have a political voice. Quilts have been created to comment on funding cuts to Planned Parenthood, environmental issues, political corruption, war, and voting suppression.⁸⁸ The AIDS Memorial Quilt is one of the best examples of political quilting.⁸⁹ That is why it is so important

⁸⁴ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 20

⁸⁵ Beardsley, *Gee's Bend: The Women*, 20.

⁸⁶ Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth*, 66.

⁸⁷ Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth*, 144-145.

⁸⁸ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 302.

⁸⁹ Shaw, *American Quilts*, 305.

that we do not ignore these quilts. We need to be centering the voices of these quilt makers and listening to what their ideas of change look like.

As author Robert A. Heinlein wrote, “A generation which ignores history has no past and no future.” We cannot begin to go forward as a society while ignoring the painful and silenced truths of the past. In the quilt created by Jessie Telfair, *Freedom*, Telfair cut out every single repeated letter of the word *freedom* individually. While they look identical at first glance, once the viewer looks closer, it is clear that they were each cut out individually. She did not try to pretend that they were all equal. Telfair acknowledged the complexity of the word *freedom*, and how every single person has a different experience with that word. Historians must resist the urge to oversimplify the American narrative, and instead be inspired by this quilt to imagine a history where all voices are represented, but not oversimplified; where freedom can and always will look different to every single American.

Chapter 4: Oral Traditions at the Dinner Table: Italian-American Immigrants Preserving Histories Over Food

“I grew up in a family where history sat at the dinner table.”¹

-Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Stories from Before: Navigating Assimilation Through Life Lessons

Many, if not all cultures have rituals around food that emphasize storytelling, comradery, or kinship. This chapter will focus specifically on how Italian-Americans have passed down *oral traditions* over food, inspired by what I witnessed as a child in an Italian-American family.

Historians, Sociologists, linguists, and folklorists have not come up with a singular definition of what an oral tradition is, but there are a few components that all scholars agree upon. As defined in *Oral Traditions as History*, a groundbreaking and transformative book that explores oral traditions, oral traditions are “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.” They must be sung, spoken, or played on a musical instrument, excluding written evidence and material culture. Author Jan Vansina also makes clear that all oral sources are not oral traditions, as the content must have been transmitted by word of mouth for at least one generation.² Some experts argue that oral traditions imply historical statements, or that they are created for the person to be able to communicate the past to the next generation, but all experts do not agree on this component of the definition.³

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015, loc 130.

² Jan M. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985). 28.

³ Joseph Calder Miller, *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, Eng., Hamden, Conn.: Dawson ; Archon, 1980).

In terms of using oral traditions as evidence, Vansina, and almost all others, argue that there must be a link between the record and the observation. This essentially means that an oral tradition cannot be considered evidence if it is constructed without an origin moment, or it cannot be an abstract grouping of events combined together. Vansina describes this process, writing: “An observer reported his experience orally, casting in it an initial message. A second party heard it and passed it on. From party to party it was passed on until the last performer, acting as informant, told it to the recorder.”⁴ Essentially, oral traditions are “successive historical documents” where every document has been lost except for the last one (the one recorded) and historical interpretations can be made based on these links and the last “chain of transmission.” While this criterion to be considered as evidence might seem wishy-washy to some, it is vitally important that historians do not exclude oral traditions as a source because of the challenges present. As will be argued in this Thesis, and as Vansina argues, oral traditions should not be treated as if they were written with “originals and copies,” but must be treated as a unique type of evidence with unique capabilities and challenges.⁵ The concept of a *thick description* from the field of Anthropology is also extremely helpful in using oral traditions as evidence. Coined by Clifford Geertz, *thick descriptions* are a “way of providing cultural context and meaning that people place on actions, words, things, etc.” The purpose of a *thick description* is to give enough context so that a person outside of the culture could make sense of the behavior.⁶

Growing up, I spent most holidays with my dad’s side of the family; my grandmother, *Nana*, is a first/second generation Italian-American, and my grandfather, *Papuli*, was a first-generation Greek-American. While I heard many stories about the controversy surrounding my

⁴ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 29.

⁵ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 29.

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 2017), 9.

grandparents' cross-ethnic marriage or the latest family drama, most of the food and stories we shared were centered around Nana's experiences as the daughter of Italian-American immigrants, with her subtle (and oftentimes not so subtle) advice for the future based on her experiences of the past. Two of the strongest memories I have are *The Feast of the Seven Fishes*, a tradition that I would learn was not *Italian* but *Italian-American*, as well as making *pizzelles* with my Nana. To an outsider, this distinction between an Italian and an Italian-American tradition might not seem that important, when in reality, this distinction represents an identity shaped by immigration, forced assimilation, and the choice to make something new while preserving traditions from the past.

The *Feast of the Seven Fishes* is a tradition that takes place on Christmas Eve where at least seven dishes of seafood are prepared and eaten in a gathering, in order to honor the abstinence of meat until Christmas Day. The tradition is most practiced by Italian-American immigrants who immigrated from Southern Italy, including *Calabria*, where my family is from. Some argue that the focus on seafood was caused by the level of poverty that existed in Southern Italy as compared to the more affluent North. While the abstinence from meat up until the birth of Christ was practiced in Italy for centuries, the creation of the specific tradition and the term, *Feast of the Seven Fishes*, is distinctly Italian-American, with the first mention in *written* evidence being in the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1983.⁷ There is no clear consensus on why the number seven was chosen, but it may have been influenced by the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church or the seven hills of Rome.⁸ Typical dishes include anchovies, sardines, *baccalà*

⁷ Nick Vadala, "Where to Eat the Feast of the Seven Fishes in the Philadelphia Area," <https://www.inquirer.com>, sec. food, food, food, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.inquirer.com/food/feast-seven-fishes-philadelphia-restaurants.html>.

⁸ Melissa Clark, "Feasting on Fish to the Seventh Degree - The New York Times," December 16, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/dining/surfs-up-on-christmas-eve.html>.; Craig Claiborne, "A Seven-Course Feast of Fish - The New York Times," December 16, 1987.

(salted cod fish), smelts, squid, octopus, shrimp, mussels, and clams. My grandmother *Nana* made an adaptation to the traditional *Feast of the Seven Dishes* and usually had at least thirteen fish dishes to represent the Twelve Apostles and Jesus. Nana was very Catholic so her take on the tradition did not seem out of place; however, I think that it had more to do with her love of feeding her family, than the number of apostles. Some of the dishes that I remember from my childhood included stuffed clams, shrimp, octopus cooked in tomatoes, fried smelt with lemon, fried sardines, and anchovies. The whole family would gather around the kitchen table and “ooh and aah” at the spread, while Nana would go through each dish and explain why she made it. As children, we were all hungry to hear her colorful stories, and the fish dishes were only a catalyst for the stories of her childhood and the traditions of her family.

I am Italian-American, but I was surrounded by Italian culture growing up as well. My mother, who is ethnically Northern European, grew up all around the world: living in the Greek islands as a child, arriving in the States on a boat with a view of the Statue of Liberty when she was eight, and eventually heading back to Europe to live in Switzerland and Italy as a young adult. While my mom eventually settled down in the States, my grandparents took up permanent residence in Italy for several decades. When my mom’s parents would visit for holidays they would bring Venetian glass necklaces, Neapolitan scarves, or the trendiest clothing from Rome. As a child, I struggled to differentiate between the two sides of my family. Nana would make us lasagna or stuffed clams, full of cheese and tomato sauce, whereas my mom’s parents would make light pastas, with veggies and freshly grated artisanal cheeses. The food was different, the celebrations were different, and what we talked about over these shared meals was different. I didn’t realize this as a child but the conversations I had with my dad’s side, conversations which provided me with colorful tales of my relatives and ancestors, and the lessons we should learn

from these stories, were part of a larger struggle among immigrants to preserve family histories, to not let a new country rewrite their history.

The ways in which food shaped Italian-American identity and the identity of other immigrant groups such as Irish and Jewish immigrants more broadly have been explored extensively by historians and food anthropologists. Italian Historian Simone Cinotto wrote one of the most well-known and influential books exploring the intersections between food and identity-making in *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City*. Cinotto and many other experts such as Donna Gabaccia and Hasia Diner have written about the new types of cuisines that were created by immigrants, how these new dishes were reflections of social and economic changes, and how food added the hyphen in between the country they came from and the U.S. For Italian immigrants specifically, food was a way to foster community among immigrants from all different regions of Italy, food was a way for Italian immigrants to develop financial independence in the economy, and food was a way for Italian-Americans to understand who they were and who they wanted to be.⁹ Italian-Americans shared meals together in numbers unseen in other immigrant groups. One statistic shows that 96% of East Harlem Italian families ate their meals together in the 1930s.¹⁰ While the intersections of food and identity among Italian-American immigrants have been explored on multiple fronts, the idea of food serving as a *medium* to preserve history among immigrants has yet to be fully explored.¹¹

⁹ Cinotto, *The Italian American*, 3.

¹⁰ Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America* (Harvard University Press, 2009). 79.

¹¹ Steven J. Zeitlin et al., *A Celebration of American Family Folklore: Tales and Traditions from the Smithsonian Collection* (Pantheon Books, 1982). 165, 171.



An Italian family has supper, East Side, New York City, 1915.¹²

Sunday Dinners are one of the clearest examples of a space where historical preservation occurred over a meal among Italian-Americans. Cinotto contextualizes the phenomenon I experienced as a kid of food serving as a medium to preserve history in his book, writing:

Struggling against what they felt to be the major threat to domestic life—their children’s alleged individualism—immigrants turned to family food rituals as the only way to socialize younger people into the ideology of the family. Around the spaghetti bowl, immigrants hoped their children’s hearts could be won by a sensual web of symbols, stories, and imagination.¹³

Parents employed history as a way to transmit values they had from Italy to children who were growing up in a culture with such different morals. Telling stories about what life and society were like in Italy became a way for (historical) memory to preserve the ideology of the *famiglia* in U.S. society. Like all histories, these memories were sometimes “remembered in ways” to provide a lesson for the American born children, or to idealize the past.¹⁴ This phenomenon is not unique to Italian-Americans but is rather an honest reflection of how memory shapes History across all cultures. In this sense, the collective memory that Italian immigrants from all different

¹² The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library, “An Italian Family Has Supper, East Side, New York City, 1915,” NYPL Digital Collections, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4d93-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

¹³ Cinotto, *the Italian American*, 58.

¹⁴ Cinotto, *the Italian American*, 59.

regions experienced were essential in creating what would become an Italian-American immigrant identity.¹⁵ While it is important to acknowledge how actions, once they were in the U.S., shaped collective identity, it is just as important to acknowledge how memories and histories of the past did so as well.

Food served as a language for Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans to share their histories, and to make sure their family lineage and stories from the past were preserved. As Cinotto so eloquently writes, “Food...functioned as a language through which immigrants made sense of themselves and their place in the world; it shaped historical spaces that shifted and reconfigured themselves in immigrants’ imagination, as they remembered the past, coped with the present, and imagined the future.”¹⁶ As someone who has studied History in a formal setting for the last four years, it is easy to forget where my passion for History came from: the stories I heard from my family growing up. While many of us picture the act of learning histories to involve books, lectures, or documentaries, history preservation also occurs through exchanges across generations, through exchanges over the kitchen table. I am interested in elevating these acts of oral traditions which most immigrant families have practiced for decades, yet have not been formally acknowledged as an act of historical preservation.

My first case study will focus on one of the first and most significant examples of a piece of writing that detailed Italian-American oral traditions, with an analysis of *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life*. My second case study features one of many oral history interviews I conducted throughout September and October of 2022, emphasizing the idea that histories are not just found in books, but in the stories we hear from our family members and elders. I have decided to focus on these two case studies: a more formalized example of Italian

¹⁵ Diner, *Hungering for America*, 66.

¹⁶ Cinotto, *the Italian American*, 76.

American storytelling, and a more informal oral history interview personal to me, because together they represent the necessary approach in order to accurately preserve Italian-American oral traditions. The first case study, *Mount Allegro*, allows oral traditions practiced behind closed doors in Italian-American families to be introduced to the greater American consciousness. This allowed other immigrant and marginalized groups to make connections with Italian Americans, along with provided a platform for Italian history more broadly to enter the public and academic sphere in the United States.

While it is extremely important for Italian and Italian-American history to have a presence in American academia and discourse, my second case study focuses on a method that is even more liberatory long term. While both methods (formal and informal) are necessary in order to create change, the informal method or the practice of passing oral traditions down through families represents a greater challenge to what we consider to be the historical method. This exchange of histories through generations is a method that rejects the hyper-formalized and “scientific” methods which define the historical method that was created by white social scientists in the 18th Century as described in Chapter 1. This method allows cultures to preserve histories using their own cultural standards and practices, rejecting the idea that all cultures preserve histories in the same way. While the work of Jerre Mangione in *Mount Allegro* was groundbreaking at the time, we must not stop there. We must elevate more “informal” traditions of historical preservation such as highlighted in the second case study in order to truly decolonize and reconceptualize the historical method.

Case Study #1: *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life*

In *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life*, Jerre Mangione, a writer and scholar, details the stories of his childhood growing up in a strict Sicilian household. His book,

published in 1943, was groundbreaking, as it was one of the first sociological analyses and ethnographies of the Italian-American immigrant experience. His account ranges from fondly reminiscing on the trouble he and his cousins would get into, to him traveling back to Sicily as an adult and being confronted with the disparities of the Sicily he imagined versus the Sicily his parents left. Mangione's book was one of the first pieces of writing published that directly challenged the melting-pot narrative, coined by Israel Zangwill in his play in 1908, *The Melting Pot*, that was seen so positively at that time.¹⁷ It encourages the reader to question whether the immigrant or the immigrant's child is better off. Mangione used the personality quirks of his family members to convey larger themes around language, assimilation, and unfulfilled dreams. An important element of his text, however, that has largely been overlooked is his emphasis on the way in which oral traditions were practiced along with what these oral traditions actually conveyed.

Throughout the book, Mangione grapples with separating tales from the past from the actual histories of his family, reflecting a larger theme represented in the culture of assimilation in the United States. Mangione wanted to find out what was true versus what was just an allegory or a fable. The struggle Mangione experienced is representative of the white-washing of history preservation that was and is still practiced in the United States today. Because the histories that Mangione heard about were conveyed orally and in the informal setting of Sunday dinner, often contained biases based on the person reading them, and contained some inaccuracies due to the passage of time, Mangione struggled to recognize them as histories. As will be demonstrated in the next chapters, what makes a tradition or method scientific can not, and must not, be defined by what white social scientists deem to be scientific. While oral traditions can be inaccurate

¹⁷ Stacy Warner Maddern, "Melting Pot Theory," in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm359>.

because of the passage of time, or due to personal biases present in the knowledge preservers, the same disparity occurs in written sources as well. Written sources also contain bias (who was able to read and write at that time period) and they also often contain factual inaccuracies (as do *all* sources). The only reason why one method is considered more scientific than the other is because the very origins of the label of “scientific” in social science, were developed to justify settler colonialism. Although Mangione does not come to reckon with this specific paradox in his writing, his writing preserves the oral traditions that allow us to begin to challenge what we consider to be historic.

In *Mount Allegro*, Mangione describes his memories of Sunday dinners or the one night a week when Jerre and his cousins were able to ask their elders about Sicily and stories of their family freely.¹⁸ While the histories that were discussed over Sunday Dinner were a way for those who grew up in Sicily to reflect back on good memories, they also served as an instrumental part of shaping the identities of those raised in the States. Mangione described why he was so intent on asking about Sicily, describing an altercation between him and a neighborhood boy writing:

That morning, after church, I had again fought the Kaiser because he called me a Sicilian and a few other things less mentionable, and I felt an urgent need to know more about Sicily if I was going to continue to take beatings for it. I wanted to know what the difference was between Sicily and Italy, and whether Sicily was a nation or a city.¹⁹

Mangione doesn't turn to his school textbook, his teachers, or a program on the radio to learn about Sicily. He waited until Sunday dinner to ask his relatives about his history. Despite Mangione's history having very real implications in the present in the form of prejudice, there were no external sources around him that preserved his history. That is why he relied on the

¹⁸ Jerre Mangione, *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian American Life* (Syracuse University Press, 1998). Loc 222.

¹⁹ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 228.

sacred Sunday dinners, or the only space where he could learn about the region he came from (and the region that he gets discriminated against for being from).²⁰

It is through Sunday dinners that Mangione began to hear about the contradictory views of life in Sicily. Mangione described countless examples of his relatives disparaging Sicily, describing it as a place of poverty with no opportunity. However, Mangione was also confronted with the very real fact that he was not allowed to eat school lunches or speak English at home, suggesting the U.S.'s inferiority. In one memory that Mangione had as a child, his uncle, Uncle Nino explained why he decided to leave Italy over Sunday dinner. Uncle Nino said:

“Sicily is beautiful, yes. So beautiful, in fact, that I should like nothing better than to return there. But it is also terribly poor. It lies at the end of the Italian boot and some government clique in Rome is always kicking it around. Some Sicilians got tired of that treatment and finally left. That, Gerlando, is the chief reason most of us are in this *maliditta terra* [damned country], where we spend our strength in factories and ditches and think of nothing but money. All that journeying and all that work just so that we might live and die with our bellies full.’ He dug his fork into another piece of sausage by way of punctuation.”²¹

In this instance, Mangione is presented with the dilemma his Sicilian-born relatives had to deal with. Over a dish of sausage, Uncle Nino perfectly summarized the conflict that so many immigrants felt. The contradiction between the superiority of Sicily and the U.S. that Mangione’s relatives dealt with also reflected the contradiction that Mangione grappled with throughout his life when he was confronted with ideas around assimilation. Mangione’s elders felt pulled between Sicily and the U.S. and Mangione felt pulled between Italian-American identity and American identity. The history of why Sicilians left was vital in helping Mangione begin to make sense of his identity.

²⁰ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 223.

²¹ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 20.

Not only was it important for histories of Sicily to be preserved for Mangione to be able to contextualize his identity, but this act of preserving histories during meals also preserves significant oral traditions such as proverbs, or parables, which revealed significant historical truths through their narratives. While Uncle Nino was known to add embellishments or exaggerations to his stories, Mangione made it clear that his respect for the truth prevented him from changing the core parts of his story.²² Uncle Nino claimed that if one knew all the Sicilian “proverbs” then one could act appropriately in any situation that was presented.²³ Not only were these proverbs important in terms of everyday problem-solving, but they provided a spiritual component as well. Although Mangione and his entire family were very Catholic, they did not regularly attend Catholic mass because the only Catholic churches in Mount Allegro had Irish priests.²⁴ Mangione contextualizes the importance of Uncle Nino’s proverbs about Sicily writing:

“In a sense, Uncle Nino’s speeches were the only kind of sermons my relatives heard, and, though they do not deal with the glories of God, they dealt with glories they understood and cherished. His words carried them away from their mundane factory existences back to a past which by now have been petrified beyond recognition by the tricks that memory can play on human beings who are not in complete harmony with their present. And although they could not understand all his allusions, they preferred him to the Irish priest who spoke a language which they understood less and which did not do as much for their souls.”²⁵

While proverbs, allegories, or parables are not necessarily the best tool to use to understand details of a certain historical time period, they can reveal a lot about what a culture valued and placed emphasis on at the time. What Mangione described as his uncle’s proverbs are actually oral traditions that revealed what Sicilians valued and feared long ago. While historical details such as population numbers or names are extremely important in preserving history, so are the

²² Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 1420.

²³ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 1412.

²⁴ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 718.

²⁵ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 1384.

values that society placed emphasis on. The morals that come from these stories had very real implications for Mangione's family in the U.S. His family was not able to rely on a church to serve as their moral guide, so instead relied on these proverbs, or these oral traditions to do so.

The table was also a place where Italian-Americans could contest the individualism of their second-generation children. In one particular story, Uncle Luigi shared with Mangione a story that stressed the importance of preserving their distinct Sicilian dialect after Mangione had protested the rule of speaking only Italian at home. In the story, an American priest who spoke perfect "schoolroom" Italian decided to travel the whole length of the country and listen to confessions as he went from town to town. Uncle Luigi described that the priest had no problem understanding the confessions in northern Italy, although he found them quite dull in content. As he traveled South of Rome, he began to have difficulties understanding the dialect, despite the more "interesting" confessions. When he was in Naples, the priest suspected that he had imposed penance far harsher than deserved, which disappointed him not only because of its inaccuracy but because he wanted to hear the details of the "most fascinating sinners in the world." By the time the priest got down to Sicily, he could not understand anything and had to conduct all of his confessions in sign language.²⁶ Uncle Luigi told this story to Mangione to stress the importance of preserving one's dialect, no matter how frustrating or seemingly pointless it felt to Mangione as someone growing up in the United States. If Mangione did not make an active effort to remember his dialect, he would be as clueless and in many ways, "un-Italian" as the priest. These stories were not only a way for Mangione's family members to preserve their histories, but to contest the individualism that "American society" was instilling onto their children.

²⁶ Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 576.

For marginalized groups, or for groups who cannot rely on traditional forms of historical preservation to learn about their histories, preserving their histories in their own ways is vital in making sure that these histories are passed down. While grappling with his identity as a “hyphenated American” Mangione writes, “But this much I knew for certain: the influence of my relatives was stronger than that of my teachers, stronger than all the movies I had seen and the books I had read.”²⁷ Mangione was unable to learn about the history of Sicily and his ancestors in school because of prejudices against Italians, and because of an agenda of assimilation. Mangione’s experience with this was not unique, however. While Mangione was able to learn about his histories over his family’s dinner table, many groups who were even more marginalized did not even have that opportunity.

Among Enslaved Black Americans, families were forced apart, making the phenomenon of preserving oral traditions much more difficult, although still done despite the extreme challenges created by the conditions of enslavement. Among Indigenous Americans, the genocide of at least 95% of their population also made this much harder to do, although again, they still found ways to preserve their oral traditions. Because of the circumstances created by settler colonialism—lack of access to education, certain voices seen as inherently inferior, or genocide—many groups had to adopt or continue to practice traditions of historical preservation that did not center written evidence. Mangione’s book doesn’t just detail how his family preserved Sicilian histories, but it shows that they *had* to do so in order to preserve their histories and create an identity in their new country. Because there was such an emphasis on written

²⁷ The idea of a “hyphenated American” was once seen and used derogatorily and was even proclaimed by Theodore Roosevelt as inherently Anti-American. It has now been reclaimed in many bi/multi-racial activist and scholar circles as liberatory and more accurate. Kay Deaux, “To Be an American: Immigration, Hyphenation, and Incorporation,” *Journal of Social Issues* 64, no. 4 (December 2008): 925–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00596.x>; Mangione, *Mount Allegro*, loc 1425.

evidence as the best way to preserve history in the U.S., groups who were excluded from written evidence, either because their writing was actively prevented from reaching a majority of readers, or because writing was not a tradition stressed in their community/culture, or because their story would challenge American myths that were being sold, had to be silenced.

Case Study #2: The Childhood of Marilyn Tinari

Marilyn Tinari, a second-generation Italian-American, shared similar experiences to Jerre Mangione. Born and raised in a suburb just outside of Philadelphia in the 1950s and 60s, Tinari's grandfather recreated "Italian village life" by building three houses right next to each other connected by gardens and chicken coops.²⁸ When asked if Italian culture was relevant to her upbringing, Tinari responded "That *was* my upbringing."²⁹ In an interview done between Marilyn Tinari and me on November 1, 2022, Tinari detailed the relevance of food in her upbringing, the ways in which her family "assimilated" to the States, and the emphasis on lessons learned from stories of the past. As a child, I remember going to Tinari's house, a coworker at the school my mom worked at, on several occasions. My memories of these get-togethers are all around food. I remember the dozens of appetizers that were scattered around the house for the guests to graze on, or how there always seemed to be many more dishes than were necessary for the number of people who were there. My interview with Tinari not only confirmed many of my memories, but Tinari's memories of food and oral traditions were eerily similar to other accounts of Italian-Americans that I had read.

Unlike Mangione, Tinari shared that her family dinners mainly consisted of conversations about how one's day went and did not on a normal basis consist of accounts from life in

²⁸ Marilyn Tinari, Oral history interview with Marilyn Tinari done by May Kotsen, Voice transcript over Zoom, transcribed, November 1, 2022. 2:11 and 7:19.

²⁹ Tinari, Oral history, 2:11.

Campania and *Montella*, where the two sides of her family were from.³⁰ I would argue that this largely has to do with the difference between Mangione being first-generation and Tinari being second-generation. Mangione's parents grew up and spent some of their adult life in Italy. Tinari's parents grew up entirely in the United States, which means that it was only her grandparents who arrived in the U.S. as children who had any sort of stories from Italy. That is not to say that Tinari never learned about her ancestors or life back in Italy though. Tinari, like Mangione, remembered most clearly learning lessons from her family members, lessons which were contextualized by stories that took place in Italy.³¹ These lessons were preserved because of their relevance and application even in the States. While Tinari did not hear as many detailed accounts of what life was like in Italy during her family's big dinners, she was reminded of her Italian heritage through the oral traditions her family members preserved.

Tinari shared one specific story that stood out to her of what she described as a "cautionary tale" from the "old country." In this particular instance, her great-uncles were arguing while riding on a cart on a narrow road in the village. Amid their argument, one of the brothers fell off the mountainside due to the commotion from his siblings and died. Tinari explained that this story was brought up when siblings in her family would be arguing. It was a story from the past that was used to influence the way Tinari and her siblings/cousins thought about the future.³² Many of us have probably heard a similar story as a child. These "cautionary tales" or life lessons are present everywhere. As children, we are presented with them in Disney movies, in picture books, and in songs. What is important and what is *historical* about Tinari's specific cautionary tale, is not necessarily what happened (there may be no way of proving if it

³⁰ Tinari, Oral history, 10:02 and 1:00.

³¹ Tinari, Oral history, 12:45.

³² Tinari, Oral history, 12:45.

was true or not) but it is the emphasis on a certain value. In this instance, the importance of kinship is emphasized. As historians, if we see one theme present in many oral traditions in one culture, then we can deduce that that value was one of the most important values in the specific culture. With an understanding of what a specific culture places value on, we can better contextualize and better interpret other sources, such as written documents.³³

In my interview with Tinari, she also explained and talked in great detail about the big family dinners that occurred every Thursday and Sunday. The entire family would get together and have pasta. This meal was never bought from the store and it was never anything besides pasta.³⁴ Tinari explained that even American holidays contained an Italian element, such as starting with spinach or escarole soup. Tinari also shared that these special dinners, or holiday dinners specifically, would start at one o'clock and end around eight o'clock at night.³⁵ Tinari described a similar feeling to what Mangione described in his book, feelings of embarrassment when eating food in public. Tinari explained that she would beg her mom, "Can't we have some American food? Like some meat and potatoes? What is this green stuff."³⁶ This cycle of silencing history and shame created a paradigm that allowed those with power in the U.S. to retain their power. Because the children of immigrants were not able to learn about their cultures and customs in schools, in settings where white-American customs were taught as "normal," immigrant children were forced to feel shame and not question the rhetoric of assimilation that was being pushed down their throats.

The feelings of embarrassment that Tinari and Mangione discussed are actually a well-documented phenomenon largely identified by Leonard Covello, the father of Italian-American

³³ Vansina, *Oral Traditions*, 23.

³⁴ Tinari, Oral history, 05:36.

³⁵ Tinari, Oral history, 06:25.

³⁶ Tinari, Oral history, 06:25.

Studies. Covello explains that shame is inevitable among the children of (Italian) immigrants and that the only way to diffuse the shame is for “the child to develop a negative attitude toward the parently culture and, vicariously at least, cease to identify himself with it.”³⁷ Covello highlighted the findings of a study by Joseph Wilfrid Tait, *Some Aspects of the Effect of the Dominant American Culture Upon Children of Italian-born Parents*. In this study, the true effects of assimilation are presented, addressing the depths of concealment the children of immigrants would turn to at school. Tait highlights one interview he conducted where an elementary-aged student would shoe-shine secretly on the weekends to make lunch money in order to buy a new sandwich that the “non-Italian boys were eating.” On the way to school, he would throw out the sandwich that his mom made for him.³⁸ To the children of Italian immigrants, food was a physical representation of their Italianness, of their “otherness.”

While the connection between food and preserving lessons from the past may not seem immediately clear at first, there is an extremely important connection between the two. Because of the active white-washing or “Americanization” of immigrants, the children of immigrants were (and still are in many ways) forced to speak English in school, read American authors, watch American television, and were in many ways utterly denied any forms of media that were relevant to their backgrounds. Food and mealtimes were one of the only settings where traditions of the past could be practiced, and the only times where they could even hear their histories because of the silencing of their histories in mainstream media and education. Despite their kids being forced to speak English at school, or despite many Italian families being unable to attend Mass, Italian mothers could still serve their children pasta and loaves of bread when they got

³⁷ Leonard H. Covello, *The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child: A Study of the Southern Italian Family Mores and Their Effect on the School Situation in Italy and America*. By L. Covello (Brill Archive, 1972). 339.

³⁸ Covello, *The Social Background*, 339-340.

home. Food being one of the only practices from Italy that could be experienced by the children of Italian immigrants in the States meant that it was often the only space where histories from Italy could be preserved. While Tinari and Mangione both clearly remembered often feeling embarrassed by eating their traditional foods, they also remember the lessons and stories shared by their relatives. This association is paramount in understanding the way food preserves histories. Serving and eating Italian food allowed Italian/Italian-American families to create spaces that challenged assimilation. These spaces created a setting in which the children of immigrants could learn important values, regardless of how assimilation would change them in the future.

The Importance of “Informal” History Preservation Through Oral Traditions

Food serving as a medium to preserve histories of Italy among Italian immigrants and Italian-Americans is just one example of “informal” historical preservation. Many immigrant groups preserve histories over food, and all immigrant groups preserve histories through oral traditions. In this instance, “informal” refers to a setting that looks entirely different from what most would imagine when picturing an act of historical preservation. Many of us disregard that long-winded story our grandmother shared with us over dinner for the hundredth time as insignificant or as an annoyance. What would happen if we started to truly recognize how significant these oral traditions were though? How would that change how we understand our identity? Our history? Other peoples' histories? This chapter is not making the argument that every story an elder shares should be immediately written down or analyzed. It is rather trying to encourage the reader to question what they consider History to be, and to reflect on their own experiences with “informal” histories. In the fields of Psychology, Human Development, and Education, there is much literature on how childhood experiences directly influence how a

person develops into adulthood. This question should not be ignored in the field of History either. How do the stories we hear as children, how do the *settings* in which we hear these stories shape who we become as adults?

The tradition of sharing family histories over food is historically significant because it identifies and preserves cultural values. As Vansina writes, “Tales especially, by creating a lifelike setting, give evidence about situations as they were observed as well as about beliefs concerning situations.”³⁹ In settings where the children of immigrants are forced to become “American” without their consent or often realization, the stories that children hear about the country or culture their family comes from, are oftentimes one of the only times where they get to learn about the values of their culture. Understanding these cultural values is incredibly important for historians, but it is also incredibly important for those who had to leave their country and start over in the States. Historians cannot begin to interpret a culture or region’s history through physical evidence if they are not able to contextualize it with the intangible values a culture had. Not only are there explicit reasons why understanding cultural values are important, but understanding cultural values can allow the children of immigrants to better understand their families and themselves. As explained in the groundbreaking collection, *A Celebration of the American Family Folklore*, oral traditions:

...often capture an ethos of an era. A family story may epitomize a certain time period even if the details are false. They also tell us much about the storytellers and how certain episodes in our national history bear upon their lives today. By combining fact and fiction expressively a family can shape its own history.⁴⁰

There is no singular “American” history. There are thousands of histories from pre-colonial communities and cultures. There are thousands of histories of immigrants from all over

³⁹ Vansina, *Oral Traditions*, 32.

⁴⁰ Zeitlin, *A Celebration of American Family*...10.

the world, many of which were forced to flee their countries due to illegal and unjust American intervention. If historians are truly invested in studying “American history” then they must invest time into listening to all parts of a group's history and giving agency back to these groups. All of the different values that different cultures bring to the U.S. when they immigrate make up “American” culture today. That is why it is vitally important for all different types of methods of historical preservation to be recognized as “historical” and as “scientific” by mainstream historians. While the histories and conclusions learned from the oral traditions described in this chapter may seem inconsequential on an individual level, as a whole, they make up a large portion of what American culture is today.

Chapter 5: Music of the Black Freedom Struggle: How Protest Songs Both Preserved History and Called For a Different Future

“In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang—the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement...We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that “We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.””¹

-Martin Luther King Jr.

A Brief History of the Music of the Black Diaspora and Black Freedom Struggle

The History of Black music from the time of enslavement to the present is a history inordinately complex and abundant. Black music in the United States has been shaped by a multitude of variables: starting with the traditions brought over from Western and Central Africa during the time of enslavement, developed by enslaved people on plantations, formed into new and distinct genres at the turn of the 20th century, and used as a way to self-articulate the pervasive discrimination experienced by all. This chapter will focus on two songs from the 20th century and will attempt to contextualize them in the complex history of the Black American musical tradition that was created in 1619. The first song, “Strange Fruit,” was deemed “Song of the Century” by *Time* in 1999, not only because of its effect on Black music, but because of its

¹ Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 2000), 65-66; Victor V. Bobetsky, ed., *We Shall Overcome: Essays on a Great American Song* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 99.

effects on the consciousness of the whole country.² “Strange Fruit” became the most well-known song that described the lynchings of Black Americans and it was in visceral detail, a song that could not be forgotten by a single listener. This song was not only revolutionary because of its content, but because it represented a shift in the trajectory of Black American music; it solidified an unbreakable union of *soul* – the intangible spirit of resistance created by Black Americans – and *song*, among Black American musicians. My second case study focuses on “We Shall Overcome,” arguably the most well-known “freedom song” of the 20th century. While many associate this song with Pete Seeger, and with both class and race organizing, the true history of this song reveals a longer history of musical appropriation and the effects of mass mobilization on music. Through studying the path “We Shall Overcome” took to become the song it is known as today, much can be learned about the significance of music as a medium for historical preservation.

Music preserves history in a multitude of ways. Music not only fosters communication and remembrance, but music can mark rituals and pass on traditions. In *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Eileen Southern goes into incredible detail describing the origins and history of Black American music. Starting off in the regions of Africa most affected by the kidnapping of enslaved peoples, Southern uses accounts from “explorers” and traders, along with modern oral traditions to piece together an “identifiable heritage” that spanned many cultural and ethnic groups. Southern writes that music was an integral part of everyday life and was usually a communal activity, involving a “call and response” structure, or an interaction between soloists and the larger group as the chorus. Music not only served religious and spiritual functions as a

² Liz Fields, “The Story behind Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ | American Masters | PBS,” American Masters, April 12, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/the-story-behind-billie-holidays-strange-fruit/17738/>.

“recreational outlet,” but served as a way of communicating experiences from the past and the present. Southern solidifies the historical value in music by confirming that the overwhelming majority of enslaved captives who were brought over to the Americas came from cultures that used music as a way of preserving histories, instilling lessons, and working through the problems of the present.³

There were many occasions in which “music making” occurred, such as in agricultural rites, new leadership figures, bringing together nations, and very importantly “reenacting historical events of significance.”⁴ Certain songs and dances were designated for births, deaths, wars, and types of work and music could be both formal and informal.⁵ Most villages had professional musicians for more formal events, which consisted of royal drummers, royal hornblowers, and praise singers.⁶ Many of the instruments used today, primarily in Jazz, have direct roots in 15th and 16th century West Africa. The membranophones, or drums, were the most significant type of instrument used at the time, but idiophones (such as xylophones), chordophones (such as fiddles), and aerophones (such as flutes) were also very important.⁷ Call and response was also a massive part of music in most West African cultures at the time which has implications both for better understanding the structure of Black American music today, and for music’s capability of historical preservation. This call-and-response structure allowed for oral histories to be better preserved, as the music served as a mnemonic device for certain lyrics (elements of the history) to be remembered.⁸ Most people can memorize the lyrics to their

³ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed (New York: Norton, 1997), 19-20.

⁴ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 5.

⁵ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 6-7.

⁶ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 8.

⁷ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 9-11.

⁸ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 17.

favorite song much easier than a few paragraphs of words without a melody. This allowed for oral histories to be much more accurately preserved.

During the Colonial Era, Black American music was much more oriented around the voice, instead of the ensemble. Due to the nature of enslavement, music was usually organized in relation to the “meetinghouse (or church), the ‘home,’ and the community.”⁹ The first kind of music that Black Americans were exposed to in a more formal setting was often in churches. Black Americans who were free were able to learn psalms in churches primarily in New England, songs which they learned in a similar way they learned folk songs: through listening to those around them and singing along.¹⁰ Throughout the next few decades as Black Americans were able to have more formalized settings, many of them sang psalms, continuing a tradition of singing familiar to them and their ancestors. In the 1730s during the Great Awakening, hymns became the new psalms, “employing religious poems instead of structural psalms.”¹¹ Hymns became an even more popular form of singing among enslaved and freed Black Americans during this time period. Holiday celebrations, dances, and festivals also served as spaces for Black American music to develop.¹²

An incredibly rich tradition of music was also developed on the fields, by enslaved people who were forced to pick cotton or other crops. These songs often contained narratives of freedom, looking to the future, and hope, and were a main form of communication. Enslaved people could talk about shared struggles and mistreatment, could relish over the few pleasures they had, and could form a communal sense of identity, despite ethnic and linguistic differences.

⁹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 23.

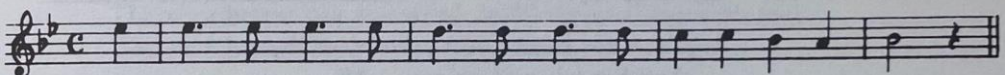
¹⁰ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 29-30.

¹¹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 33.

¹² Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 48-52.

Songs that described the perils of escape or daily life were common, along with work songs and recreational music (in order below).¹³

I Know Moonlight, from *Slave Songs of the United States*



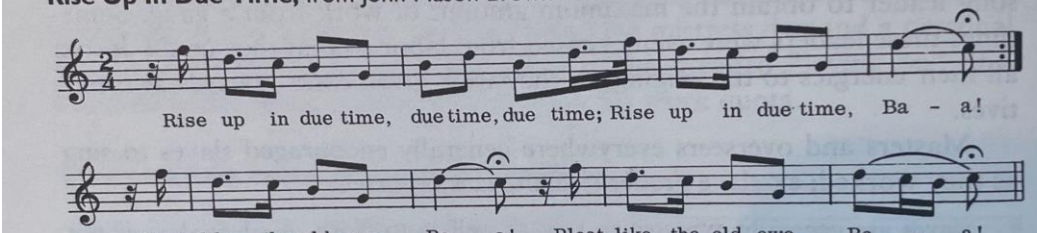
I know moon-light, I know star-light; I lay dis bod - y down.

2. I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight;
I lay dis body down.

3. I know de graveyard, I know de graveyard,
When I lay dis body down.

Example of a song describing death on the plantation from *Slave Songs of the United States*, 1867.¹⁴

Rise Up In Due Time, from John Mason Brown

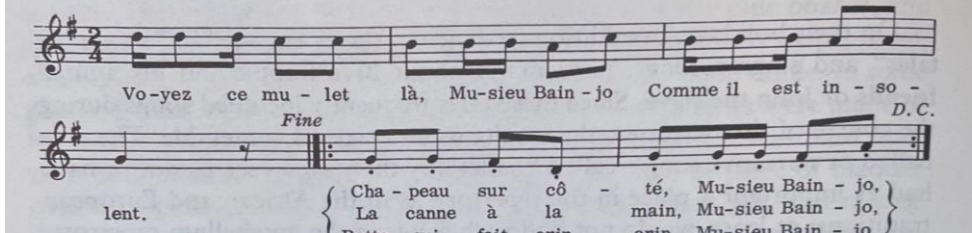


Rise up in due time, due time, due time; Rise up in due time, Ba - a!

Bleat like the old ewe, Ba - a! Bleat like the old ewe, Ba - a!

Example of a work song, from *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*.¹⁵

Musieu Bainjo, from *Slave Songs of the United States*



Vo-yez ce mu - let là, Mu-sieu Bain - jo Comme il est in - so -

Fine *D. C.*

lent. { Cha - peau sur cô - té, Mu-sieu Bain - jo,
La canne à la main, Mu-sieu Bain - jo,
Botte qui fait crin, crin, Mu-sieu Bain - jo, }

Example of a recreational song used to poke fun at each other from *Slave Songs of the United States*, 1867.¹⁶

¹³ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 156-160.

¹⁴ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 162.

¹⁵ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 174.

¹⁶ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 157.

The songs that were created by enslaved people were notoriously hard for white musicians to transcribe. Most of the songs recorded in *Slave Songs*, a collection of 132 transcriptions of songs sung by enslaved people published in 1831, were transcribed in the major and pentatonic modes. Reading the transcriptions primarily in the major key might give off the impression that these songs were joyful. This is not the case, however, and rather reflects white musicians' incapacity to transcribe songs with certain accidentals, flattened sevenths, and "bent" pitch.¹⁷ In terms of rhythm, drums were prohibited so hand clapping and stomping became the most pervasive way to mark beats. While time signatures were usually basic in structure, what some would label as *syncopation* emerged as a way for diverse melodic patterns to be layered on top of simpler time signatures. The specific evolution of chord and scale structures will be discussed further in Case Study #2. All of these elements, formed by the challenges present in both plantation and urban life formed a distinct Black folk music style that is still pervasive today.¹⁸

Southern argues that there were three main reasons why Black American music was able to emerge as a distinct tradition despite such oppressive circumstances. The first is because enslaved musicians had been forced to provide "entertainment" for white slave owners. This established a long history of white viewers being entertained by Black bodies, something still extremely relevant today in not just the musical sphere, but also in sports and entertainment. The second reason was because of the demand for music in a new country. The United States had to form a new national identity, separate from that of Europe. Art was an extremely necessary component of the new identity, and white Americans were unable to form a completely new "American" style of art on their own. That is why they turned to Black musicians and Black

¹⁷ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 192.

¹⁸ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 195.

artists (as discussed in Chapter 3), to help create this new identity. Lastly, white Americans were curious about the capabilities of people who had so recently been enslaved, an element of exotification still seen today as well.¹⁹ White Northerners, especially, were curious to be exposed to a group of people who they were increasingly seeing more of in their cities due to the Great Migration. Because of the segregation they enforced, entertainment was one of the only spheres where this “mingling” could occur. To contrast the uses of Black music for white listeners, Bessie Jones, a vocalist in the Georgia Sea Island Singers explained that music was so important for Black Americans because it was:

The only place where we could say we did not like slavery, say it for ourselves to hear, was in these old songs. We could not read and the master thought he could trap us with no existence and we could do nothing about it. But we did—even as children—with the music. And it is our own; it came from ourselves.

These old-time songs were sung way back when our foreparents didn't know one note from another. These songs was handed down to them, and we're still singing in the way that they did, and there's people taking note of it.

We're teaching you, telling you where we came from with these songs. Our children, and your children, are all coming on up. They call us the old-time. You know, they'll call y'all old-time someday too. I'm just going to stay old like this and let you people know where those songs you're singing now came from. You get it all so you'll know where the foundation is. You got to know the bottom before you know the top. Then you'll know when you're at.²⁰

Lastly, it is important to briefly touch upon the precursors of Jazz: Ragtime and the Blues. Ragtime came about as a completely distinct form of music, separate from the global musical changes that were occurring among white musical communities. Ragtime is primarily focused on the piano, an instrument that marked a shift in access pre-enslavement and post-enslavement. In Ragtime, the left hand was in charge of rhythm and would simulate the effects of

¹⁹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 99.

²⁰ Guy Carawan and Carawan, Candie, eds., *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (New York, N.Y., United States: Oak Publishing, 1968), 112.

the clapping and stomping. The right hand focused on melodies, solidifying a tradition of syncopation that was emerging. Ragtime was also clearly inspired by fiddle and banjo tunes, which had been passed down all the way from West Africa. Ragtime, also called “jig piano” became popular in Black families because it was played during gatherings that would have been prohibited during enslavement. It marked the development of a distinct and autonomous social tradition that was forming, as well as the development of an emerging Black urban culture, as ragtime was often played in bars, or in spaces of leisure.²¹

To identify the first time the Blues emerged as a distinct genre would be doing a disservice to the nature of the genre, and would be likely impossible given the scores of accounts that date the Blues in different years. The Blues is categorized by fluidity; it takes shape while it is being performed. It often reflects how the singer or performer is feeling in a particular situation in a unique way, thus cannot be predicted or uniform. The Blues were a way for singers and musicians to work through their pain, to achieve “a kind of catharsis” despite everything they were going through. Similar to quilting and writing *testimonios*, the act of singing the Blues liberated the musician. It allowed them to reflect fully autonomously on their experiences, and release them outwards. The Blues were not solely songs of misery though, they usually had an element of irony or humor. The origins of the Blues can be traced back to “sorrow songs” sung among enslaved people on plantations. In 1903 W.E.B. DuBois wrote that:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not their skins.²²

²¹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 314-317.

²² Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant*, 130.

Even prior to enslavement, the Blues follow a three-line stanza format which is rooted in West African musical traditions and distinct from European folk song traditions.²³

The emergence of Ragtime and The Blues represented an autonomous shift fueled by centuries of traditions spanning two continents and the Atlantic Ocean. Out of the Blues, came Jazz, a genre more rooted in individualism. Jazz placed emphasis on the voice and how the voice could be replicated with instruments through scooping, sliding, whining, growling, and falsetto. Jazz has a written score that contains the roadmap of the song, but it is up to the player to create their individual way.²⁴ It was the traditions of Ragtime, the Blues, Sorrow Songs, and the formation of Jazz that led to the two songs that will be discussed in the following case studies.

Factual Evidence or Folk Songs: Songs of the Underground Railroad

Before I dive into the two case studies, it is important that I address the controversial history of the Underground Railroad songs. Similar to the Underground Railroad quilts as described in Chapter 3, the validity (use and date) of many Underground Railroad songs has come into question in recent years. One of the best examples of this is the song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Taught in many classrooms and used in popular culture since 1928, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” was understood to be a song that described how enslaved people should escape by following the Big Dipper star formation. First published in 1928 by the Texas Folklore Society, it was recorded by H.B. Parks when he heard the song in North Carolina in 1912, in Louisville in 1913, and in Texas in 1918. One of the reasons why “Follow the Drinking Gourd” first started being questioned was because H.B. Parks’s great-uncle, who allegedly explained the song and confirmed its existence to Parks, died four years before Parks was even born. The song

²³ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 333-335.

²⁴ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 367.

only gained the attention of the whole nation in the 1950s when it became used as a Freedom Song during the Civil Rights movement.²⁵ The main reason why this song has come under question though is because of its content. New discoveries show that not as many enslaved people escaped and headed North as people initially thought and that many headed to other Southern cities and to the Midwest. Many also argue that such explicit lyrics would have violated the basic tenets of the Underground Railroad which was to not get caught at all costs.²⁶

Even more than the Underground Railroad quilts, the “coded message” thesis in these songs has been perpetuated by NASA, the National Park Service, and the National Security Agency despite a lack of written documentation corroborating the song’s use during the Underground Railroad.²⁷ In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass conveys that these songs, or *Spirituals*, allowed enslaved people to express positive desires about freedom, such as in “O Cannan.” He explains that these songs did not have specific directions for escaping but rather reflected the feeling of escaping “North” metaphorically.²⁸ While “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” one of the most well-known songs associated with the Underground Railroad is most likely not from the Underground Railroad, there is documented evidence from Harriet Tubman herself, that songs were used to aid in escaping. Transcribed by Sarah Branford, Tubman described a hymn sung from a distance to concealed “fugitives” in the woods.²⁹

*Hail, oh hail ye happy spirits,
Death no more shall make you fear,
No grief nor sorrow, pain nor anger (anguish)*

²⁵ James B. Kelley, “Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd,’” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 2 (April 2008): 262–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00502.x>; Joel Bresler, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” 2012 2008, http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org/The_Song_As_History.htm.

²⁶ PBS, “The Underground Railroad | American Experience | PBS,” accessed February 18, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/lincolns-underground-railroad/>.

²⁷ Kelley, “Song Story of History,” 267-268.

²⁸ Kelley, “Song Story of History,” 269.

²⁹ Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn: W.J. Moses, Printer, 1869), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bradford/bradford.html>.

Shall no more distress you there.

*Around him are ten thousan' angels,
Always ready to 'bey comman'.
Dey are always hobring round you,
Till you reach the hebbently lan'.*

*Jesus, Jesus will go wid you;
He will lead you to his throne;
He who died has gone before you,
Trode wine-press all alone.*

*He whose thunders shake creation;
He who bids the planets roll;
He who rides upon the temple, (tempest)
An' his scepter sways de whole.*

*Dark and thorny is de desert,
Through de pilgrim makes his ways,
Yet beyon' dis vale of sorrow,
Lies de fiel's of endless days.³⁰*

This was one of several songs that Tubman described to Bradford which clearly documents that songs were used to help people escape in the Underground Railroad. This song and the others she described aligned with Douglass's perspective more than the typical national narrative. They did not give explicit directions on how to escape, but rather represented more broad themes about freedom and God. These songs are extremely valuable historically because they represent a documentation of the narratives that were being spread by escaped enslaved people and the motivations behind what was the scariest decision of their lives.

While it is important to be critical of some of the Underground Railroad songs, historians must not just cast these songs aside when they find a lack of historical evidence to support their date. For one, there are songs that were sung in the Underground Railroad and were used to aid in escape that are not well known in the public consciousness. These songs, such as the one

³⁰ Bradford, *Scenes in the Life*, 26.

described above, and “O Cannan,” must be introduced into schools and children's books with the same reverence that songs with more explicit-escape messages have been. Just because a clear “secret message/code” is not as visible, does not mean the content is any less important.

Secondly, it is crucial that historians study why songs like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” were so widely celebrated for being something they most likely are not. What social conditions caused these songs to gain these meanings? How did a lack of sources from enslaved people escaping enslavement influence the desire for these songs to be those sources? Lastly, historians must look for evidence to either support or denounce these songs in more places than just the written archive. Throughout all of my research of these songs, the only type of evidence that was used as a corroborator was written evidence. Why is this the only criterion for a valid source? What other markers can we use to validate sources? Can we turn towards material culture, such as pieces of art or carvings to support the validity or lack thereof of these songs? What do early oral history testimonies look like? All of these variables must be considered before denouncing these songs as fiction.

Case Study #1: Strange Fruit: The Making of the “Song of the Century”³¹

Many people have heard the song “Strange Fruit” in a history class or in a documentary about Black History month. Many people, however, don’t know the full history behind the song, and what event inspired the author to write the song in the first place. It was the brutal lynchings of Abram Smith and Thomas Shipp (a third man named James Cameron was miraculously spared) in 1930 that inspired schoolteacher Lewis Allan, aka Abel Meeropol to write the lyrics to “Strange Fruit” in 1937. A white, Jewish school teacher from the Bronx, Allan who went by his

³¹ CW: This Case Study will have a photo of a lynching in a few pages. Please feel free to skip this case study if that would be emotionally triggering.

stage name Meeropol, was inspired by the photo of the lynchings along with his life as a schoolteacher, communist, and Jewish man to write the song.³² Meeropol originally published the lyrics that would become “Strange Fruit” as a poem entitled “Bitter Fruit” in the journal of *The New York Teacher* in 1937 and in the Marxist journal *The New Masses* shortly after. Due to its success in the journals, Meeropol turned the poem into a song, and Meeropol and his wife, Laura Duncan, performed it at protest rallies across New York City. The song was introduced to Billie Holiday, the vocalist who would make the song so popular when Holiday started singing at Café Society in Greenwich Village, the first integrated nightclub in New York City. Holiday was hesitant to perform the song at first, fearing racial violence and the politicization of her performances, however as biographer David Margolick wrote, “she didn’t sing anything unless she had lived it.”³³ While “Strange Fruit” would eventually become one of Holiday’s most well-known songs, it ultimately contributed to her untimely death when U.S. government agents framed her by selling her heroin in order to stop the spread of the song.³⁴

In 1930 two Black men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were lynched in the town center of Marion, Indiana. The two men along with James Cameron had been arrested and accused of the robbery and murder of a white factory worker, Claude Deeter, and the rape of his friend Mary Ball.³⁵ The three men were dragged out of the jail by a group of white locals, where

³² Hardeep Phull, *Story behind the Protest Song: A Reference Guide to the 50 Songs That Changed the 20th Century* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2008).

³³ David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song*, 1. ed (New York: Ecco Press, 2001), 12.

³⁴ Liz Fields, “The Story behind Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ | American Masters | PBS,” American Masters, April 12, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/the-story-behind-billie-holidays-strange-fruit/17738/>; While this piece of history is not well known by many it is important to note. Harry Anslinger, the commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, demanded that Holiday stop singing the song because of its message on racism and violence. Because of that, Anslinger capitalized on Holiday’s long history of drug addiction (fueled by childhood sexual trauma) and ordered his agents to sell heroin to her to frame her. She died soon after being arrested at the age of 44 due to pulmonary edema and heart failure, caused by the drug use and stress of being arrested.

³⁵ All Things Considered, “Strange Fruit: Anniversary Of A Lynching : NPR,” accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2010/08/06/129025516/strange-fruit-anniversary-of-a-lynching>.

they were beaten and hanged on a nearby tree. Cameron was spared for unclear reasons and managed to escape. Local photographer Lawrence Beitler took the photo shown below, and thousands of copies were distributed. It is important to note two things here. From 1882-1968 there were at least 4,743 lynchings according to the NAACP, and about 72% of those lynchings were of Black people.³⁶ It is estimated that at least one-third of the lynching victims were falsely accused, although that percentage is most likely *much* higher.³⁷ Secondly, these lynching photos were so widely circulated not because of how horrific they were, but because many white people enjoyed the voyeuristic nature of looking at these photographs. Underneath Shipp and Smith is a white “spectator” glaring right at the camera looking almost prideful. There are several white people towards the bottom smiling and looking joyous. Lynchings were an attraction for white people, they were communal and even “celebratory.”³⁸



Lawrence Beitler, photo of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930.³⁹

³⁶ NAACP, “History of Lynching in America | NAACP,” accessed February 20, 2023, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

³⁷ Gunnar Myrdal and Sissela Bok, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Black and African-American Studies (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 561.

³⁸ Phull, *Story Behind a Protest Song*, 13.

³⁹ All Things Considered, “Strange Fruit,” 2010.; I went back and forth on whether I should include this photo or not. I think that in many cases the photos of lynched Black individuals are too casually used,

While thousands of copies were made and sold of this photograph, it is the legacy of “Strange Fruit” that caused this photo to be in history textbooks. Before “Strange Fruit” this photo was circulated mainly because of the joy and fascination it brought white folks. Meeropol wrote that “even in the North, some people have ceased to be concerned when another lynching occurs, and they jest about going South to see a lynching.”⁴⁰ The reason why this photo is one of the most famous photos of a lynching, taught in textbooks and shown in documentaries, is because “Strange Fruit” made it historic. “Strange Fruit” ensured that this lynching would be remembered for what it truly was, an atrocious and horrific act of mob violence that was rampant in the South at this time. The lyrics of “Strange Fruit” paired with the melody and style in which Holiday sang it were what made the song stand out.

Southern trees bear strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of Magnolias, sweet and fresh
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
 For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁴¹

The song starts off with an instrumental introduction, almost a “gasp,” a four-bar-long

without purpose. The casual use of these photos perpetuates the violence of “spectatorship” that was so common during these lynchings. I think that these photos should only be used when absolutely necessary, and I have deemed this moment as such.

⁴⁰ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 21.

⁴¹ Abel Meeropol. “Billie Holiday – Strange Fruit Lyrics | Genius Lyrics.” Accessed February 20, 2023. <https://genius.com/Billie-holiday-strange-fruit-lyrics>.

muted trumpet wail, with rustled crashed cymbals that transition into a “contemplative” piano chord.⁴² Author Hardeep Phull argues that this longer-than-normal instrumental introduction symbolizes the actual lynching, whereas the start of the lyrics symbolizes the post-lynching reflection. The chords chosen, in the key of B-flat minor, a notoriously “dark” or sad key, along with the dynamics and range disparities, cause the listener to both feel a sense of somberness on behalf of the piano, and a desire to hang on to every word that Holiday is singing. With a simple and stark tone, Holiday matter of factly describes the victims of lynching as bloody fruit, employing imagery that cannot be avoided by the listener. The second verse contrasts the horrific imagery of bloody bodies with the picturesque South, switching between graphic (“bulging eyes,” “burning flesh”) and pleasant imagery (“scent of Magnolias sweet and fresh”) without pause. The third verse introduces the role of nature (crows, rain, wind, sun), causing the listener to question the ways in which racism is seen as natural in the United States. The last line, perhaps one of the most profound lines, is the most intense vocally, almost a yell to the audience. The word “crop” ends on an F instead of a B-flat, leaving the song unresolved (like the life of a man lynched). The word “crop,” purposefully chosen, causes the listener to wonder what the difference is between the crops that caused the enslavement and death of millions, and the “crops” (bodies) hanging from the trees. It causes the listener to question whether a crop like cotton is valued more and protected more than the actual bodies hanging from the trees.⁴³

The song became very popular and was Holiday’s most requested song when she played at Jazz clubs. It was most praised in leftist and “intellectual” circles, but the very nature of the song caused lynching to be discussed in all circles, many circles that had only looked at lynching

⁴² John M. Carvalho, “‘Strange Fruit’: Music between Violence and Death: Strange Fruit,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 1 (February 2013): 111–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2012.01547.x>, 113.

⁴³ Phull, *Story Behind a Protest Song*, 15.

in one way before. While the song did not stop lynchings, it was the first “realization of wrongdoing, awakening to injustice, and alert to inhumanity” of its kind.⁴⁴ It was the first piece of media that reached the majority of Americans, sixteen years before the arrest of Rosa Parks, and it left a lasting impact that could not be forgotten. The founder of Atlantic Records said that it was, “a declaration of war...the beginning of the civil rights movement.”⁴⁵ The song not only left an impact on the consciousness of America, but it set a precedent for protest and freedom songs of the century. The content of the song and the protest songs inspired by “Strange Fruit” were so powerful because they were *felt*, not just heard.⁴⁶

“Strange Fruit” preserves history in many ways. It preserves the story of the lynchings of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, lynchings that like so many others, would have most likely been only remembered by family members and Black community members without Holiday’s song. The song also preserves history by serving as one of the first forms of art that reached so many Americans that talked about lynching in such a transparent way. The voices of Black people were being silenced by all parts of society. The trauma and testimonies of those who experienced or witnessed these lynchings were *not* reaching the attention of the national stage. The Blues had used hidden language but this song was one of, if not the first that truly described, unapologetically, the horrors of lynching.⁴⁷ Bassist Charles Mingus wrote that “Strange Fruit” changed his “idea of a song telling a story. That music is here to tell the white world the wrongs they done in race.”⁴⁸ As described in a testimony of Vernon Jarrett after he heard Billie Holiday perform “Strange Fruit” for the first time:

She was standing up there singing this song as though this was for real, as if she had just:

⁴⁴ Phull, *Story Behind a Protest Song*, 16.

⁴⁵ Phull, *Story Behind a Protest Song*, 16.

⁴⁶ Carvalho, “Strange Fruit”; Music, 116.

⁴⁷ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 39.

⁴⁸ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 98.

witnessed a lynching. That's what knocked me out... When I heard her sing I heard other kinds of lynchings, not just hanging from trees. I saw my own mother and father, two college-educated people, and all the crap they had to go through... To me, that was part of the whole lynch syndrome, the lynching of the body and the spirit put together. That's the way her face looked when she sang that... It enhanced my commitment to changing this stuff, that's what I did. I once heard 'Strange Fruit' while I was driving and I tried to park the car, out of respect for her—just to let her voice sink in.⁴⁹

“Strange Fruit” motivated listeners all over the country who would eventually become Civil Rights activists, to speak out and demand change. This song also sets a precedent for Black music in the 20th Century. “Strange Fruit” showed Black musicians that protest songs were valuable and necessary. At a time when the only Black songs that were being consumed by the general public were light and non-political, “Strange Fruit” as Angela Davis wrote, “put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture.”⁵⁰ Songs, such as “Strange Fruit” could better preserve history and call for change than just photographs, or newspaper articles, as proven by the popularity of “Strange Fruit.” Many Black veterans recall playing “Strange Fruit” during World War II to remind each other that there was still unfinished business back home.⁵¹ “Strange Fruit” was sent to congressmen by thousands of listeners, as the “strongest indictments of lynching ever penned,” when anti-lynching resolutions were finally being proposed.⁵² It made listeners realize that the victims of lynchings were actual humans, and it allowed for anger to not shadow but elevate the facts.⁵³ Singer Bobby Short said that the song was the “first significant protest in words and music, the first *unmuted* cry against racism.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 43-44.

⁵⁰ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 7.

⁵¹ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 65.

⁵² Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 58.

⁵³ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 48-50.

⁵⁴ Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 4.; Emphasis is my own.

Case Study #2: The Complicated History of the Song That Changed the World: “We Shall Overcome”

“We Shall Overcome” is one of the most famous freedom songs in the United States, and arguably in the world. Sung during Apartheid in South Africa, by Catholics in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, and at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, the song has had a far-reaching impact for groups demanding rights around the world.⁵⁵ While many associate the song's origins with Pete Seeger’s version during the Civil Rights era, or during labor movements in the 1940s, the song “We Shall Overcome” actually has its roots in 18th Century Italy through the song, “O Sanctissima.”⁵⁶ The public misconceptions about the journey “We Shall Overcome” took to become the song so well known today are crucial in understanding the ways in which Black music is appropriated, the ways in which folk music responds to changing social climates, and in uncovering all of the movements that used the song to call for freedom. By uncovering the truths behind the song, through avoiding the white-washing and oversimplification that makes up the current narratives, historians allow for the title and nature of the song to ring true.

The image shows a musical score for the song "We Shall Overcome". It consists of two staves: a melody line and a guitar accompaniment line. The melody line is in 4/4 time and features a series of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are written below the melody line. The guitar accompaniment line is in 4/4 time and features a series of chords and eighth notes. The chords are labeled with letters: C, F, Am, D7, G, Em, F, G7, Am, C, F, C, G7, C. The lyrics are: "We shall o - ver - come, we shall o - ver - come, We shall o - ver - come some-day oh, deep in my heart (I know that) I do be - lieve (oh) we shall o - ver - come some-day. We are not afraid, we are not afraid, We'll walk hand in hand . . . We are not afraid today. Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, The Lord will see us through. . . We shall overcome someday. We are not alone, . . . (today) Black and white together (now) The truth will make us free . . . We shall all be free. 11"

“We Shall Overcome” published in a songbook by Guy and Candie Carawan in 1963.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song*, 4.

⁵⁶ Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song*, 1.

⁵⁷ Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, eds., *We Shall Overcome!: Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), 11.

In a groundbreaking exploration of the song “We Shall Overcome,” author Victor Bobetsky traced the origins of the song back through seven songs, all of which contain similar “musical and textural ideas” through “melody, rhythm, harmonic progressions, phrase structure” and lyrics to “We Shall Overcome.”⁵⁸ Bobetsky starts by defining the folk process, or a process in which reinvention, borrowing, and cross-fertilization occur, forming a “musical family tree” that links all seven songs together. The earliest antecedent of “We Shall Overcome” has been identified to be an Italian or Sicilian folk song entitled “O Sanctissima.” This song has been identified as the first layer of “We Shall Overcome’s” tree because of its “succession of pitches and the melodic rhythm” in the opening phrase, because of the melodic contour and harmonic chord progression in the middle of the song, and because of the descending arc at the end of the song. Simply put, the first two pitches in “O Sanctissima” mirror the opening phrase of “We Shall Overcome” with sol-sol-la-la-sol-fa-mi. In measures 5-8, the melodic contour consists of an interval of a fourth and a harmonic progression, similar to “We Shall Overcome” which consists of a fifth and harmonic progression. Lastly, in measures 13-16, the song descends on a fourth (hi do to sol and then fa to low lo) compared to three fourths in “We Shall Overcome” (hi do to sol, la to mi, and fa to do).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Victor V. Bobetsky, “The Complex Ancestry of ‘We Shall Overcome,’” *Choral Journal* 54, no. 7 (February 2014): 27–36, 35.

⁵⁹ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 28.



“O Sanctissima” measures 1-8 and 13-16 from the *European Magazine and Review*, November 1792.⁶⁰

The next song in the musical tree is “No More Auction Block” also known as “Many Thousand Gone.” This song was not created by any one person but was sung amongst enslaved people on the cotton fields and preserved orally by Black soldiers during the Civil War. It was called by Colonel T. W. Higginson, a “secular spiritual” during the War. The song followed a call-and-response structure, and had both melodic and rhythmic similarities to “We Shall Overcome.” The first three pitches in “No More Auction Block” and “We Shall Overcome” were identical (sol-la-sol) and Bobetsky writes that the overall “melodic rhythm of the first five successive notes” were similar.⁶¹ It was when “No More Auction Block” was being sung that “O Sanctissima” was probably introduced to Black Americans, as songs from Europe were being published and circulated in song collections at the time. These songs were influencing each other and were being spread throughout the East Coast of North America by Black Americans, as there is evidence that “No More Auction Block” was sung by freed formerly enslaved people in Nova Scotia in 1833, who had access to “O Sanctissima” through a published songbook that was in Nova Scotia at the time.⁶² The lyrics of “No More Auction Block” are extremely important

⁶⁰ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 28.

⁶¹ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 29.

⁶² Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 29.

historically because they documented the voices of enslaved people and because they inspired enslaved people in the moment to push back.

The image shows a musical score for the song "No More Auction Block" in 4/8 time, featuring a call and response structure. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score is divided into two systems, each with a "Call" and "Response" section. The first system includes the lyrics: "1. No more auc-tion block for me, No more, no more, No more, no more,". The second system includes the lyrics: "No more auc-tion block for me, Ma-ny thou-sand gone. Ma-ny thou-sand gone." Below the second system, there are six numbered variations of the lyrics:

2. No more peck of corn for me, *etc.*
3. No more driver's lash for me, *etc.*
4. No more pint of salt for me, *etc.*
5. No more hundred lash for me, *etc.*
6. No more mistress' call for me, *etc.*

Anonymous, "No More Auction Block" from *Many Thousand Gone* Jubilee and Plantation Songs.⁶³

The next song in the musical tree, "I'll Overcome Some Day" shared no melodic similarities with "We Shall Overcome" but was rather similar in terms of lyrical content. The lyrics, "I'll overcome some day, I'll overcome some day; If in my heart I do not yield, I'll overcome some day" were inspired by Charles Albert Tindley's experiences as a descendant of enslaved parents.⁶⁴ The second verse in that song inspired "I'll Be Like Him Someday" which was a gospel hymn written and published by Roberta Evelyn Martin in 1945. "I'll Be Like Him Someday" contained many similarities to "O Sanctissima" probably due to the fact that Martin played the organ in her Protestant church, which used "O Sanctissima" as a hymn. Measures 5-8 in Martin's song are very similar to measures 5-8 in "O Sanctissima" with just one small difference in degree in the melodic arc. Both songs share overlapping fourths and a descending

⁶³ Bobetsky, "The Complicated Ancestry," 29.

⁶⁴ Bobetsky, "The Complicated Ancestry," 30.

octave passage. In terms of “I’ll Be Like Him Someday’s” similarities to “We Shall Overcome,” measures 5-16 are almost identical melodically, and much of the lyrics were inspired by “I’ll Overcome Some Day.”⁶⁵

Roberta Martin, “I’ll Be Like Him Someday,” measures 5-16.⁶⁶

The next song in the musical tree is “I’ll Overcome Someday” a gospel song written by Kenneth Morris and Atron Twig.⁶⁷ The AB structure (verse and chorus) of “I’ll Overcome Someday” are extremely similar to the structure of “We Shall Overcome” however the melodies are completely different. The lyrics are very similar to “I’ll Overcome Some Day” and “We Shall Overcome” and represent the capabilities of gospel songs to talk about secular problems. The next song, “I’ll Be All Right” was an orally transmitted folk song that contained the same element of syncopation that “We Shall Overcome” has. The lyrics are very similar to the songs that have been discussed so far and similar to “We Shall Overcome,” the harmony is moved to a dominant chord. Bobetsky writes that the architectural structure of all the songs discussed are very similar to “We Shall Overcome.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 31.

⁶⁶ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 31.

⁶⁷ “I’ll Overcome *Some Day*” and “I’ll Overcome *Someday*” are two different songs (note the space between Some and Day).

⁶⁸ Bobetsky, “The Complicated Ancestry,” 32-33.

I'll o - - ver - come some - day, some hap - py day. I'll
I'll sure - ly o - ver - come, yes, o - ver - come some - day, I'll sure - ly o - ver - come some hap - py, hap - py day, I'll

Kenneth Morris and Atron Twig, "I'll Overcome Someday," measures 1-4.⁶⁹

I'll be all right, I'll be all right, I'll be all right some-day,
If in my heart I do be - lieve, I'll be all right some-day.

"I'll Be Alright," from *Have a Little More Faith*, Reverend Gary Davis, 1961.⁷⁰

Lastly, in 1945 the song "I Will Overcome" first appeared as a protest song when it was adopted by labor strikers, both by Black workers in a Congress of Industrial Organizations strike and most well known at a tobacco workers' strike in Charleston, South Carolina. The syncopation and melody in "I'll Be Alright" and "I Will Overcome" were simplified by Lucille Simmons who adopted the song from what she had heard in church in order to better fit the context of the strike. Instead of singing it as a gospel, she adopted it to the "long meter style" or as a slow ballad with no rhythm. During the strike, she might have also changed the song from "I" to "we."⁷¹ The context that led to the change from "I" to "we" is extremely important for historians to understand. As explained by composer Bernie Johnson-Reagon, the "I" was used because in A.A.V.E. "I" meant the whole group was being identified, whereas "we" was too ambiguous and didn't acknowledge who particularly was a part of the "we." There is some evidence that it was liberal whites wanted to change the song from "I" to "we" in order to make

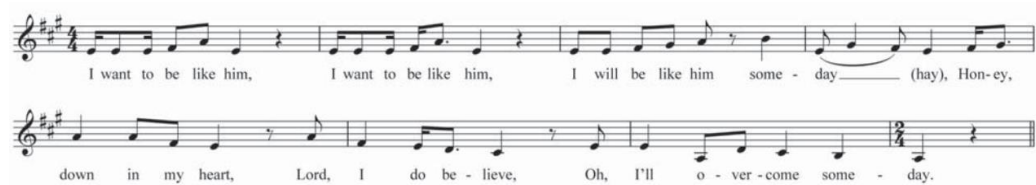
⁶⁹ Bobetsky, "The Complicated Ancestry," 32.

⁷⁰ Bobetsky, "The Complicated Ancestry," 33.

⁷¹ Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song*, 2.

it seem more of a group effort as well as evidence that Black musicians created this change.

Cordell Reagon, a Black singer, was one of the first Black singers to call for this transition on a national stage because he wanted to acknowledge the role of his white counterparts in organizing. It is unclear who was the first person to create this change, with some experts claiming it was Simmons or Reagon, and some saying it was white musicians.⁷² It is thought that Pete Seeger, who first heard the song after the tobacco strike decided to change “will” to “shall” so that it could be better enunciated.⁷³ Recent evidence however suggests that it was Septima Clarke, the director of the folk school that spread the song so widely, that made this shift.⁷⁴



“I Will Overcome,” from *Sing for Freedom*, ed. Seeger and Carawan, p. 239.

It is important to better understand the American Tobacco strike of 1945, which occurred in Charleston, South Carolina because it was this moment in history that propelled the song known today into the national spotlight. Unionized and almost entirely Black workers, both men and women, went on strike over pay for over five months. Those who participated in the strike described it as “nasty,” with rough weather conditions and long hours. One of the picket captains, Lillie May Marsh wrote:

“To keep up morale, the remaining pickets would ‘sing themselves away’ some days. We sang I’ll be all right...we will win our rights...we will win this fight...the Lord will see us through...we will overcome. We sang it with a clap and a shout until sometimes the cops would quiet us down.”⁷⁵

⁷² Noah Adams, “The Inspiring Force Of ‘We Shall Overcome,’” *NPR*, August 28, 2013, sec. The Summer of ‘63, <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/28/216482943/the-inspiring-force-of-we-shall-overcome>.

⁷³ Phull, *Story Behind the Protest Song*, 3.

⁷⁴ Victor V. Bobetsky, ed., *We Shall Overcome: Essays on a Great American Song* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 18.

⁷⁵ Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 138.

During one march in particular, Lucille Simmons, a worker at the factory and a woman who has been completely excluded from the larger narrative of the development of this song, sang out loud “I Will Overcome” with some accounts saying that she was the one who switched it to “We Will Overcome.” As stated previously, Simmons gave it its signature sound, slowing down the meter and evoking a call-and-response structure that better fit a protest, instead of a church hall like where she had originally heard it. This moment in history offers an alternative origin story for the Black Freedom Struggle, one that started decades before most would think and one that was rooted in labor struggles.

Two of the strikers were invited to the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, where one of the leaders of the school, Zilphia Horton, heard the song for the first time. Horton was most likely the person who introduced the song to Pete Seeger as she spread the song to protest groups all over the country. Pete Seeger published a version of “We Shall Overcome” in 1952, and Martin Luther King Jr. heard Seeger sing the song just five years later. It is reported that King was heavily inspired by the song, humming it as he exited the event, however, it was Guy Carawan who really spread the song throughout the Civil Rights movement (such as in SNCC). Carawan tried to turn the song into a ballad, however, Black youth fought back and instead reclaimed it as a more “spirited, soulful rhythm.”⁷⁶

As outlined by Sam A. Rosenthal in “A Folksong in Flight: Peete Seeger and the Genesis of ‘We Shall Overcome,’” understanding how a folksong is created, or the folk process, is extremely valuable to historians. In the folksong process, the “original” song is historical because of its value in the community it was created in. The reason why a folk process occurred

⁷⁶ Hardeep Phull, *Story behind the Protest Song: A Reference Guide to the 50 Songs That Changed the 20th Century* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2008), 2-3.

is because the original song was extremely important and relevant to a specific community. Identifying the original song allows historians to identify what was important to marginalized communities. Looking at the next step in the folk process, or how the song is shaped to fit the needs of the time it is shaped in, is also very revealing for historians because it can provide information about what was relevant to these communities at the time. There had to be a wide enough demand for these songs to change so the collective voice is very well represented. Along with tracing the evolution, understanding the folk process is important because it is important to understand the way original content influences the content of the future. A lot of the protest songs from the 20th century had their roots in songs created by enslaved people on plantations.⁷⁷ The content was obviously different to some degree, as Civil Rights activists were no longer singing about the bondage of chains and cotton, but were now singing about the bondage of voter suppression and segregation.

It is important for historians to identify both the differences and continuities in content over the years. Seeger and many others argued that it was this folk process, the idea of songs being “transmitted, learned, and altered to suit the individual or group’s needs” that constituted folk music itself.⁷⁸ In Seeger’s autobiography, he detailed an extremely important moment:

“One woman on the Selma march saw me try to notate a melody and said with a smile, ‘Don’t you know you can’t write down freedom songs?’--which has been said by everyone who ever tried to capture Negro folk music with European music notation. All I can do is repeat what my father once told me: ‘A folksong in a book is like a picture of a bird in midflight...the bird was moving before the picture was taken, and continued flying afterwards. It is valuable for the scientific record to know when and where the picture was taken, but no one is so foolish as to think that the picture *is* the bird.’”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 20.

⁷⁸ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 20.

⁷⁹ Guy Carawan and Carawan, Candie, eds., *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* (New York, N.Y., United States: Oak Publishing, 1968); Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 21.

Seeger perfectly explains the historical value of understanding the folk process behind a particular folksong. It is extremely important to understand the historical context of the song, how it has evolved, and who it represents. That information is not to replace the actual validity of the song itself, but rather represents the photos (historical circumstances) that portray the actual bird (or song in this instance). These factors or “photos” were identified at the International Folk Music Conference in 1954 as “(i) continuity which links the present to the past, (ii) variation which springs from the creative individual to the group, and (iii) selection by community which determines the form...in which the music survives.”⁸⁰ While these criteria are valuable for understanding the folk process they are also valuable to historians because they identify the three most important variables that should be used when identifying the historical significance of a folksong.

The Freedom Singers were a group of singers who formed a quartet in 1962 at Albany State College. A combination of a church service and a political rally, Seeger saw the potential for the group to spread messages of freedom all over the country and suggested that they tour with SNCC. The group became very well known and was joined by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and others during their rendition of “We Shall Overcome” in 1963.⁸¹ The group was so powerful because it changed people, “individual people” as activist Cordell Hull Reagon stated.⁸² While government officials or out-of-touch wealthy white folks would not be influenced by the Freedom Singers, the individual people, families, and communities were. Through uniting all the individuals the Freedom Singers were able to create a mass front united as one.

⁸⁰ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 21.

⁸¹ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 28-39.

⁸² Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 39.

While Seeger had much influence over the spread and popularity of the song, there have been valuable critiques raised in recent years of Seeger's choices and factors which led to "transmutation." "Transmutation," as identified by expert Andrew Aprile as "changes in musical idiom as the song evolved," is a large component of any folksong. However, Aprile argues that because "We Shall Overcome" was adopted by mainly white musicians in the middle of the 20th Century, very important Black musical notation traditions were lost and excluded in notation, such as swooping, sliding, accidentals, and "blue notes."⁸³ While Aprile recognizes the potential issues with deeming certain musical traits as "Black," he recognizes the *historical* roots in music theory that were created by West Africans and continued by enslaved people in the United States as notationally Black. Aprile and other music historians such as Samuel Floyd Jr. argue that:

European notation of transcendent, abstract beauty (which leads to formalist analysis and criticism in which 'good intonation,' 'ensemble blend and balance,' 'proper harmonic progression,' 'precise attacks, and other concerns take precedence over the content of what is expressed and communicated').⁸⁴

Accordingly, Black music which does not prioritize these Eurocentric traits but rather focuses on lyrical content, improvisation, call and response, and distinct chord progressions and accidentals, are all not included in traditional notational styles and thus not notated (and preserved) properly. Because of that, Eurocentric notation, most of which is very inaccurate, takes precedence in the historical record.

As stated previously, Seeger and many others think that the ways in which the folk process occurs reveals the value of the folk song. While this is very true to some degree, Aprile others that Seeger neutralizes the process and makes it seem that characteristics that do not survive time, or that are dropped in the process occur because of natural circumstances. This folk

⁸³ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 43, 49.

⁸⁴ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 44.

process as outlined by Seeger does not acknowledge the ways in which Eurocentric musical notation influences what musical characteristics are preserved, as outlined above. Aprile identifies this as a sort of musical gentrification. In support of Aprile's theory of gentrification is the fact that Seeger made money off of the song when he copyrighted it in 1963.⁸⁵ Seeger, Carawan, and Frank Hamilton, all white men, were listed as the publishers. While Zilphia Horton (a white woman) was listed as a songwriter, Lucille Simmons was not. Seeger and the others claimed that all of the money would go to SNCC.⁸⁶ While it is said that Seeger decided to copyright the song to prevent someone else from doing it and profiting off of it, Seeger and others were not completely transparent about where the money was going, especially once SNCC dissolved.⁸⁷ These two factors, white-skewed notation and profit, have led some experts and Black activists to argue that "We Shall Overcome" is one of the most famous examples of musical appropriation.

The Significance of Music as History: *Soul* as Historical Preservation

*"History never happens in straight lines. The lines connecting events extend across space and time in tangled, irreducible patterns. All forms of storytelling oversimplify the patterns, but music simplifies less than most. Structurally, music mirrors the complications of history. Moving forward through time, music immerses us in a narrative flow, gives us a sense of how what happened yesterday shapes what's happening now. But the simultaneous quality of music—its ability to make us aware of the many voices surrounding at a single moment—adds another dimension to our sense of the world."*⁸⁸

-Craig Hansen Werner

⁸⁵ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 54.

⁸⁶ Phull, *Story Behind the*, 4.

⁸⁷ Bobetsky, *We Shall Overcome*, 54.

⁸⁸ Craig Hansen Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America*, Rev. & updated (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006). xiii-xiv.

Julius Lester, a famous Black writer, argued that Black music was a way for Black Americans to conceptualize their identity in a country that was not a melting pot, despite what it claimed. Lester wrote that some Black people tried to get rid of all “blackness” from their lives, changing the way they talked, their habits, and their cuisine, all in hopes of “melting into” “American” culture. Lester argues that *rhythm* is the language of Black Americans, and allowed Black Americans to create their own identity that doesn’t need to be “melted into” the pot. Lester said that rhythm is apparent in the way a Black person walks, the way they talk, and that this phenomenon is called *Soul*. *Soul* is uniquely Black and *cannot* be taken away by white Americans. *Soul* is a testimony to the survival of enslavement and the survival of all the traditions that white Americans tried to strip Black Americans of.⁸⁹ It was *Soul* that helped freedom workers resist the KKK in Atlanta in 1965. Margaret Long described this event, writing that after KKK members lined up across from peaceful pickets outside of a restaurant, two Black youths started singing “We Shall Overcome”:

‘Black and white together, black and white together...’ sang the laughing Negroes, most of them now dancing as they clapped. The music swelled and pounded louder, faster, and more aggressive, and the twisting girls and laughing boys danced and clapped closer and closer to the Klan. The young voices sang at the angry white faces, ‘we shall brothers be...we shall brothers be...we shall brothers be, someday...’...The singing went on for hours, until many of us thought the poor Klansmen would, indeed, be overcome by the volume of the music, the power of the beat, and the hilarity of the ridicule.⁹⁰

It was *Soul* that gave these Black youth the courage to stand up against the KKK and shower them in song.

If one does not know where one came from, one cannot truly know who they are and what one can become. How do we expect groups of people who were denied the ability to record and preserve their history via pen and paper, or whose primary methods of historical preservation

⁸⁹ Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 220.

⁹⁰ Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 43.

have been actively relegated as “folk history” or as just music and not considered as “real history,” to truly understand their own history? That is why it is so important that music is seen for what it truly is: an extremely effective method of historical preservation. Rapper Chuck D. argues that “rap music is Black America’s CNN” and scholar Craig Werner and many others argue that this extends to the gospel music that inspired the Black Freedom Struggle.⁹¹ Esau Jenkins, an activist, and preacher argued that:

Regardless of how well a person can sing the classical songs and opera, they don’t have that feeling of people who sang from oppressed soul and need. Those songs come from the soul. Even if it was the blues, it’s sweet because it comes from a person that is in need for something and is longing for decency and friendship. Now if we hide those sweet songs and try to get away from what we came from, what will we tell our children about the achievement we have made and the distance we have come.⁹²

Jenkins acknowledges the distinct nature of Black American music, as well as acknowledges the phenomena of Soul that Julius Lester described. Jenkins also writes about the importance of music as historical preservation in the present. It documents all of the achievements Black Americans have been able to achieve despite the many barriers they have faced. Willie Peacock, the organizer of the first Mississippi Folk Festival, wrote that Black music allows Black people to share the burden of racism, to express their feelings against the oppressors, and to come together. Peacock argues that Black music allows people to come together and be unified under a common goal, similar to what is described in Chapters 3, 6, and 7.

It is extremely important to acknowledge the history of white co-optation of Black American music. The appropriation of Black music is not only found in “We Shall Overcome.” As documented by freedom workers in the 1960s, ragtime, jazz, blues, gospel music, genres of music that the country wanted to hear, were seen as shameful in the deep South where they

⁹¹ Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come*, xv.

⁹² Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 135.

originated from.⁹³ There was a disconnect between the conditions that caused these songs to be created, and who was profiting off of and enjoying those songs on a national level. While this phenomenon was first described over fifty years ago, this still occurs today. Musical appropriation and cultural appropriation more broadly means that Black children grow up hearing that their preferences or traditions are “ghetto” or “ratchet,” while simultaneously watching AAVE be appropriated in the media and cornrows be seen as a “new” style at New York Fashion Week. American pop culture constantly strips Black people of their culture, telling them they are inferior for it, and then profits off it under a new name. That is why it is so important for the music created by southern Black Americans, to be returned to their children and grandchildren in the South. Black children need to be told that it was their family members that created history. Their family members are the ones who created so widely celebrated genres such as Jazz, Soul, and R&B. Black children need to know their true histories in order to be able to truly demand the future they are worthy of.

Black music preserves not just Black American history, but American history more broadly in a multitude of ways. Lyrics preserve messages that were meaningful to certain groups at certain times, and often describe the conditions that these songs were created under, such as the lyrics that described the two lynchings in “Strange Fruit.” Chord progressions and scores more broadly reflect both the evolution of folk songs, or the folk process, but also document the ways in which white notation styles have appropriated falsely preserved rhythms, melodies, dynamics, and stylistic elements, such as demonstrated in “We Shall Overcome.” The emotions felt through these songs, or the *Soul*, gives Black Americans the strength to resist white oppression through many generations. Black music creates spaces where history can be made,

⁹³ Carawan, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 110.

where solidarity can be formed, and where healing can begin. As described in *Hidden in Plain View*:

Spirituals taken as a whole contain a record and a revelation of the deeper thoughts and experiences of the Negro in this country for a period beginning three hundred years ago and covering two and half centuries. If you wish to know what they are you will find them written more plainly in these songs than in any pages of history.⁹⁴

We as historians cannot expect to find accurate historical narratives in sources not created by the subject whom they are about, and in methods that these communities do not prioritize or practice. Centuries of history, spanning back to central and western Africa, surviving the horrific conditions of plantations, the Civil War, Jim Crow South, and mass incarceration are readily available to historians but have been largely cast aside as anything more than folk history. The same techniques used in determining biases and intent in written sources can also be applied to musical sources. Historians must not be afraid to challenge their methods, for histories that reveal unimaginable truths and powerful stories are, oftentimes now, just a YouTube video away.

⁹⁴ Tobin and Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View*, 126.

Chapter 6: Community Museums: Preserving History Through Material Culture

What is a Community Museum?

“Community Museum.” You may have heard that term used to describe the small historical society in your hometown, or maybe you just assumed that it described a museum that tells the histories of a particular community. The term “Community Museum” still has not been officially defined by the American Alliance of Museums or the International Council of Museums, yet Community Museums have existed since 1967 with the founding of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. While an official definition of a Community Museum evades textbooks and Google, there is a collection of practices that all Community Museums share, which many critical museum scholars and New Museologists have consolidated. One of these central tenets is the idea that the curator serves a role as a facilitator rather than a figure of authority.¹

Community Museums serve as a space where community groups can choose what they want an exhibition to be about, curate the exhibition, select their own objects, and mount it as they please.² In traditional history museums, such as the National Museum of American History, curators need have no relation to the content and objects they are displaying. In a Community Museum, this is the opposite.

In fact, Community Museums take this one step further and emphasize ideas rather than objects. This is because the framework developed by and practiced by Community Museums challenges the idea that objects are inherently objective. Instead, they shine a light on the

¹ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (Psychology Press, 2003), 79.

² Witcomb, *Re-Imagining*, 82.

ideological basis of a museum, and all of the work that goes into making an exhibition. Focusing on narrative instead, “objects are understood to be mute unless they are interpreted.”³ In a traditional museum, exhibition makers and curators need to assume what the audience will bring with them regarding their identity, past experiences, and personal histories. Many exhibition creators don’t even attempt to postulate this though, and instead automatically create exhibitions with a “mainstream,” or white, audience in mind. By recognizing that it is impossible to predict a unitary audience, Community Museums allow the script to be flipped, and for past experiences, histories, and identities to shape the exhibitions themselves.⁴

Why is it so important to see yourself accurately and proportionally represented in a museum? If you’re going to disagree with an exhibition, or not be represented in one, why even go to the museum? Many New Museologists and critical museum theorists argue that communities often look at museums as a space in which their identity can be articulated.⁵ Museum professional Faith Davis Ruffins argues that historical narratives and interpretations are “simultaneously operative” and that their historical, political, and economic implications are inextricably linked with preservation interests. For example, exclusion in society through segregation, political discrimination, or social racism is directly linked with how and how much a group is represented in a museum. How a group is treated in society and how a group is represented in a museum influence each other. If a group is not represented or inaccurately represented in a museum, it is not only because of societal pressure influencing the exhibition, but the museum’s representation influences how society views and thus treats the group.⁶

³ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 86.

⁴ Steven D. Lavine. “Audience, Ownership, and Authority: Designing Relations between Museums and Communities.” In *Museums and Communities*. Smithsonian Institution, 1992, 139-140.

⁵ Christine Mullen Kreamer, “Defining Communities Through Exhibiting and Collecting,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, 2013, 371.

⁶ Kreamer, “Defining Communities,” 375.

Not only is it vital for all groups to be represented in a museum, but *how* they are represented is just as important. Anthropologist and curator Adrienne Kaeppler argues that museums are often regarded as “historical treasure houses,” a place where public perceptions are influenced by linking material cultures to their history. The way an object or material culture is displayed affects the way an object is interpreted.⁷ In displaying a musical record, for example, there has to be a decision on whether the record will be displayed to demonstrate how the record changed history when it was released, if it told a history through its lyrics that were significant, or if it is a work of art, signifying the start of a new genre. If this decision is made by someone who did not experience the impact of this material object, a new narrative, and an often false one, is automatically created. That is why it is so important for communities to not only see their history as worthy of being remembered in a museum but to have agency over *how* their histories are told.

While Community Museums are far less common than traditionally structured museums, traditional museums still have the opportunity to approach each exhibition using the frameworks practiced in Community Museums. A traditional museum might choose to make a specific exhibition more collaborative to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of new exhibitions, to test and develop programs with the future audience, to provide educational opportunities for members of the said community, or to help visitors feel a sense of agency over how their history is being displayed and told.⁸ Exhibitions in traditional museums that engage with community members are called *Participatory Exhibitions*. These types of exhibitions fall into two categories: Consultative and Co-development. The difference between the two is that Consultative participants help guide the project whereas Co-developers help create them. This is

⁷ Kreamer, “Defining Communities,” 372.

⁸ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), 231-232.

a bridge that traditional museums will never be able to cross. Unless traditional museums promise to focus solely on local histories, or themes that reflect local interest, traditional museums will never be able to fully transition into a Co-development structure, despite what they claim.⁹

This chapter will provide some context as to the origins of Community Museums, and then highlight two Case Studies that are exemplary examples of Community Museums. A description of the Anacostia Community Museum is necessary as it was the first Community Museum in the United States. The successes and failures of the ACM helped create the framework that Community Museums across the country would follow. While the ACM was the first official Community Museum of its kind, Case Study #2 focuses on an Indigenous museum, which technically falls under the category of a Community Museum, but in many ways was also developed entirely separate from the framework of an official Community Museum. I chose to include Case Study #2, or the Him-Dak Ak-Chin Ecomuseum in my Community Museum chapter because not only does it fall under the genre of a Community Museum, but because due to Indigenous frameworks and conceptualizations, it is even more radical and transformative than traditional Community Museums. I believe that non-Indigenous and traditional Community Museums should turn to museums such as the one created by the Ak-Chin community, to make their museums even more community-oriented. While Case Study #2 is at the radical end of Community Museums, Case Study #1, or the Wing Luke Museum, focuses on a more traditional Community Museum. The Wing Luke Museum is the only pan-Asian art and history museum in the country. It is an extremely significant Community Museum because of how successful its Community Advisory Committee has been and also because it is a Community Museum that is

⁹ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 235.

able to honor multiple separate cultures in one space, something necessary but challenging for Community Museums.

The First of Its Kind: Anacostia Community Museum

The Anacostia Community Museum, originally called the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum was founded in 1967 as part of a larger project of the Smithsonian Institution aimed at reaching out to communities and populations in D.C. who were showing up in lower numbers at the museums on the Mall. The original structure of the Anacostia Community Museum, or ACM, was that of a ‘drop-in’ or ‘storefront’ museum. Spearheaded by S. Dillon Ripley, the secretary of the Smithsonian at the time, Ripley wanted a space where material objects could be displayed in a location that was more accessible to “inner-city” D.C. residents. Ripley commented on this imagined space saying:

Involvement can only be created if it is their museum. It must be on the spot, participated in by the people who live there. This was our principle in 1966 when we in the Smithsonian started looking about for a neighborhood which might want a neighborhood museum. We looked for a site, perhaps an abandoned movie theatre or a grocery store, given up because some new chain store had taken over the district. Our one guideline was that the area must have stability, not be too full of transients or migratory unemployed. Preferably we wanted a block that contained a laundromat, that symbol of daytime neighborhood involvement, rather than too many bars.¹⁰

While his use of patronizing language may be surprising to the present-day reader, Ripley’s views on museum accessibility and agency were considered rather radical among many white museum professionals at the time.

The Smithsonian looked at many “inner-city” neighborhoods in D.C. but decided on Anacostia because of the extensive lobbying from Anacostia residents, the majority of whom

¹⁰ Portia James, “Building a Community-Based Identity at Anacostia Museum,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 372–92, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=199390>, 374.

very much wanted the museum to be in their neighborhood.¹¹ This is an important note because even though the framework of a Community Museum did not yet exist at this time, this established that a Community Museum cannot exist in a neighborhood or community that does not want it. This is not to say that all residents were completely open to the idea. In 1967, Anacostia was a predominantly Black neighborhood and at this time (and in many ways still today), there had been no museum that had accurately reflected the Black American experience. The first president of ACM, John Kinard, was very aware of the hesitation and fear that Anacostians felt. To help remedy some of these concerns, ACM set up an informal advisory committee that met weekly to plan the museum's exhibitions and programming.¹² Every agency, from civil organizations to school groups, churches, and community centers had at least one representative at every meeting. This was the first advisory committee of its kind in the museum world and set a precedent for Community Museums in the future (a precedent that ACM was unable to keep up with).¹³

The informal advisory committee that was set up, and the decision to create a museum in Anacostia in the first place can be contextualized as a broader shift present in the Black Freedom Struggle, with an increasing emphasis on citizen participation. Under President Johnson, the Model Cities Program was established in 1965, largely in response to studies that were coming out that highlighted just how much of an issue poverty was in urban spaces, and how poverty in those spaces was inextricably tied with who had political agency. Under the Department of Housing and Urban Development, pre-existing urban programs were consolidated and changed

¹¹ Zora Martin-Felton and Gail S. Lowe, *A Different Drummer: John Kinard and the Anacostia Museum 1967-1989* (United States of America: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 18.

¹² Sharon Reinckens, "Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum at 50," *Washington History* 29, no. 2 (2017): 62–64.

¹³ James, "Building a Community Based," 375.

with the hopes of addressing increasingly apparent problems in urban settings.¹⁴ While the Model Cities Program had some issues, it was still quite unprecedented as it acknowledged the core flaws in the political structure, attempting to give agency back to Black residents, or “resident participation.”¹⁵ The Model Cities Program operated under the idea that “participation was necessary to battle the culture of poverty by infusing a sense of ownership.”¹⁶ Links between the Model Cities Program, the ACM Advisory Committee, and even initiatives created by Stokely Carmichael in the Black Power Movement can be observed and contextualized into a larger pattern of citizen participation and agency in the Black Freedom Struggle.

From the beginning, community members, museum staff, and people who served both roles disagreed over what the mission of the museum should be. Ripley wanted ACM to be a way to incentivize more people to view Smithsonian exhibitions, even if they lived on a bus line which made that hard. Community advisors and residents did not want this to be the mission, however. They wanted ACM to be a space to share *their* insights, perspectives, and histories, with a larger Smithsonian audience. One could argue that the decision the Smithsonian made to include community members in the decision-making process from the get-go eventually caused it to turn into a museum for Anacostians, instead of a Smithsonian outpost.¹⁷ While the Anacostia Community Museums has gone through many changes over the last few decades, including name changes, location changes, getting rid of the advisory committee, and bringing back the advisory committee, at the core of its structure was and still is a dedication to community participation.

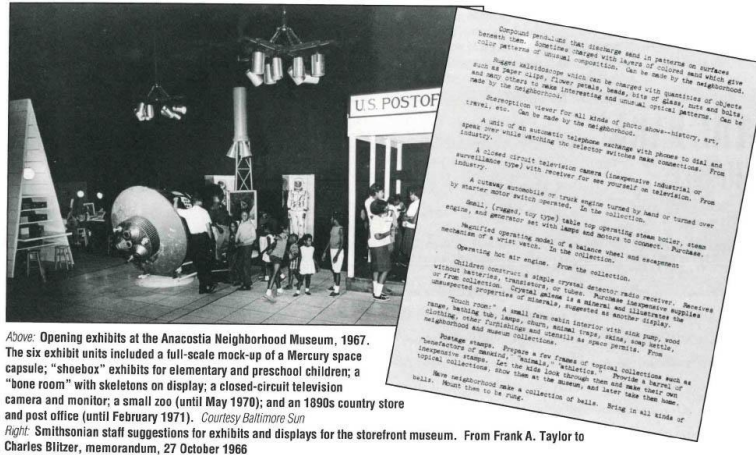
¹⁴ Bret A. Weber and Amanda Wallace, “Revealing the Empowerment Revolution: A Literature Review of the Model Cities Program,” *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 173–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144211420653>, 176.

¹⁵ Weber and Wallace, “Revealing the Empowerment,” 179.

¹⁶ Weber and Wallace, “Revealing the Empowerment,” 177.

¹⁷ Weber and Wallace, “Revealing the Empowerment,” 377.

While this has looked different over the years, ACM created the building blocks that have allowed other Community Museums to grow and evolve in the rest of the United States.



Above: Opening exhibits at the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, 1967. The six exhibit units included a full-scale mock-up of a Mercury space capsule; "shoebox" exhibits for elementary and preschool children; a "bone room" with skeletons on display; a closed-circuit television camera and monitor; a small zoo (until May 1970); and an 1890s country store and post office (until February 1971). Courtesy Baltimore Sun
Right: Smithsonian staff suggestions for exhibits and displays for the storefront museum. From Frank A. Taylor to Charles Blitzer, memorandum, 27 October 1966

Scan from *A Different Drummer: John Kinard and the Anacostia Museum 1967-1989*.¹⁸

Case Study #1: The Wing Luke Museum

The Wing Luke Museum is a Community Museum that has been extremely successful in its community-centered mission. Established in 1967, the Wing Luke Museum is an art and history museum located in Seattle's Chinatown-International District. The museum focuses on the culture and art history of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, and is the only pan-Asian Pacific American Community Museum in the United States. The museum is named after Wing Chong Luke, the first person of color elected to the Seattle City Council and the first Asian American elected to public office in the Pacific Northwest.¹⁹ Luke was born in Guangzhou China in 1925 and moved to Seattle with his family in 1931. Along with joining the army in 1944 and serving in the Philippines, Luke also received degrees in political science, public administration, and law from the University of Washington and received a graduate degree from American University. In 1962 Luke decided to run for political office, running on a

¹⁸ Martin-Felton and Lowe, *A Different Drummer*, 22.

¹⁹ "About Us," Wing Luke Museum, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.wingluke.org/about>.

platform focused on urban renewal and Civil Rights. Despite several smear campaigns and accusations of communist ties, Luke won, largely due to the immense community support he received from other Chinese American and Asian American residents. Luke had been discussing with friends and family his idea to create a local museum before his unfortunate death in 1965 in a tragic plane crash. He had explained to his sister that “there were enough museums for jade and silks...It was the living culture that was going to die off, and there needed to be something to preserve it.”²⁰ In 1967, the Wing Luke Memorial Foundation was created in honor of Wing Luke, and the Wing Luke Memorial Museum was opened in a small storefront on 8th avenue.²¹

The museum initially focused on Asian Folk Art but in the 1980s it made the transition to be more community-based, opening up a trio of galleries. One gallery was dedicated to the International District histories, one space for exhibitions relating to the interests of the pan-Asian community, and a third gallery that could be rented out to the community. This thematic transition, location change, and change in name to the Wing Luke Asian Museum was led by local journalist Ron Chew, a huge advocate for a community-based model of exhibition development that the museum would soon adopt.²² This was the first space of its kind for members of the pan-Asian community in the Northwest, along with one of the first museums of its kind in the whole country. In 1993, the museum formed the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) which, similar to the Anacostia Community Museum, allowed local artists, community leaders, and staff to develop exhibitions, curate artifacts, and create their own exhibitions. In 2008 the Wing Luke Museum moved to its current location on South King Street and became a

²⁰ Sherry Stripling, “Wing Luke: The Man behind the Museum,” *The Seattle Times*, February 25, 2005, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/wing-luke-the-man-behind-the-museum/>.

²¹ “About Us,” Wing Luke Museum.

²² Cay Lane Wren, “The Wing Takes Flight: How the Wing Luke Museum Built a Home for the Asian American Community,” n.d., scholarworks.seattleu.edu/wing-luke-museum, 7-9.

National Park Service Affiliated Area. It also became the first Smithsonian-affiliated organization in the Pacific Northwest.²³

The Community Advisory Committee or the CAC is one of the best-executed community advisory groups out of any Community Museums in the country. The museum functions under the idea that instead of the museum staff telling the community what the museum is about, community members tell the museum what *they* are about. The CAC works collaboratively with museum staff (many of whom don't have museum degrees) to determine the main messages and themes in exhibitions, direct the content selection and "personality" of the exhibition, and to guide the educational programming. The guidelines, themes, and ideas that are established by the CAC become the basis of the educational programming that the museum staff then develops. Staff are chosen not because of their educational achievements or degrees, but by their position in their community.²⁴ Many critiques of Community Museums argue two things. They argue that there will always be a divide among staff members and community members, and they argue that an entirely community-participant model is impractical and doesn't allow for the necessary roles in a museum to be filled. The Wing Luke Museum perfectly counters these two critiques by employing and training community members as staff, eliminating the divide with the community while still fulfilling the necessary roles in a museum.

One of the most well-known community exhibitions that the Wing Luke Museum displayed, was *Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After*, which opened on February 19, 1992, exactly 50 years after the federal order was instated. *Executive Order* was the first of its kind for the museum, as well as the first of its kind for the nation. Despite being

²³ "About Us," Wing Luke Museum

²⁴ Emily Utt and Steven L. Olsen, "A Sense of Place in Museum Public Programming: Three Case Studies," *The Journal of Museum Education* 32, no. 3 (2007): 295–302.

repeatedly warned by “museum experts” that a community-designed exhibition would not work, Ron Chew, the newly appointed director of the Wing Luke Museum decided to create an exhibition that would give voices to those who were imprisoned in concentration camps and their children. He wanted the exhibition to not only tell the histories during imprisonment, but to also tell the histories of the loss of property rights before, and the struggle to rebuild lives and heal afterward.²⁵ The exhibition took over a year to create, with over 100 Japanese Americans working collaboratively at the museum to not only create the exhibition together but to form deep relationships across age gaps and political differences, and perhaps most importantly, to heal. The exhibition “affirmed the restorative power of the oral tradition and the first-person voice of ordinary people.” As Chew described, the exhibition gave agency back to the people whose history the exhibition was about, giving them the power to dictate their own histories, instead of being “token advisors.” The exhibition ended up being the most successful exhibition in the museum’s history, drawing in over 50,000 visitors in the span of seven months and receiving several awards and national acclaim from museum critics.²⁶

In history textbooks or when Japanese “internment” is talked about in the public narrative, not much effort is put into describing the history of Japanese Americans in the U.S., along with what occurred pre and post-imprisonment. Because *Executive Order* was entirely created by people who survived the concentration camps, and by the descendants of survivors, the exhibition portrays a much more holistic and comprehensive narrative. Starting with immigration to Hawaii in 1868, and more wide-scale immigration to mainland U.S. in the 1890s,

²⁵ I use the words “imprisonment” and “concentration camps” throughout this case study intentionally, despite the fact that the words “evacuation” and “internment” camps are the most used terms historically. I use the first two terms in this case study in order to be more accurate in what I am describing, to use the words preferred by survivors, and to avoid using the words the federal government used to justify their illegal and immoral actions.

²⁶ David A. Takami, *Divided Destiny: A History of Japanese Americans in Seattle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press : Wing Luke Asian Museum, 1998), 4-5.

the exhibition displays pictures of families who were immigrating, along with pictures of everyday acts, such as food delivery and barbershops. Discussing the implications of railroad work and farming (over 75% of California’s vegetables were supplied by Japanese farmers at this time), the community members who created the exhibition were able to undo the narrative of immigrants being a burden to the United States, and instead, rightfully demonstrate that the United States would not be what it is today without the tireless labor of immigrants.²⁷



The Kato, Hanada, and Miyoshi families pick berries, 1918.²⁸ Japanese farmers sell produce at the Pike Place Market, 1910.²⁹

The exhibition then goes on to tackle the real estate covenants that existed in Seattle which caused ghettos to be formed for Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans. It is important to recognize that this started in 1891 with the creation of Nihonmachi, as racial covenants are often inaccurately contextualized as something that only started with the Great Migration of African Americans. Nihonmachi was the first forced Japanese neighborhood that was created in Seattle. The neighborhood was extremely lively and populated, with dozens of businesses including restaurants, barbershops, bathhouses, laundries, hotels, etc. Nihonmachi became the center of Japanese American life in the Pacific Northwest, a place that represented

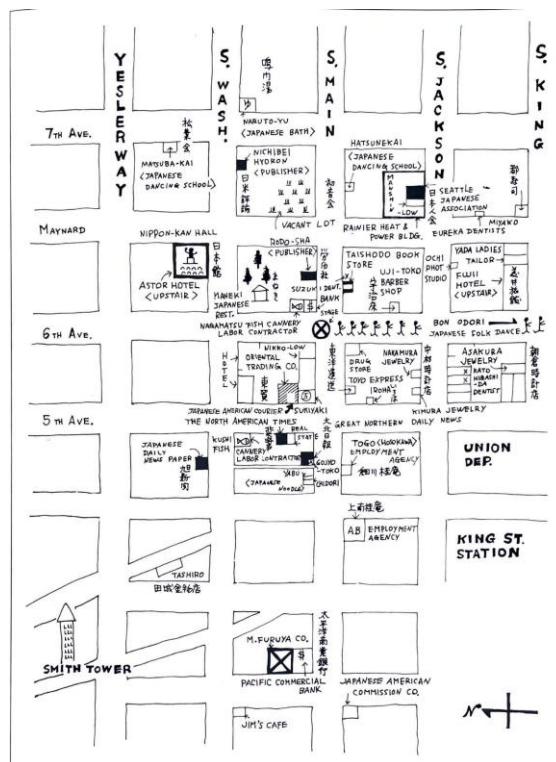
²⁷ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 16-22.

²⁸ Courtesy of Mae Iseri Yamada, “The Kato, Hanada, and Miyoshi Families Pick Berries” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1918).

²⁹ Courtesy Museum of History and Industry, Webster/Stevens Collection, “Japanese Farmers Sell Produce at the Pike Place Market” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, c 1910).

the conglomeration of multiple identities. Studying this neighborhood (and choosing to feature it as the community members did) is essential in understanding American history because it is one of the best examples of where Japanese American identity was created and how it flourished.

Journalist Kazuo Ito recorded a map of the neighborhood in the 1920s that the community members chose to display. It details the many stores that existed, reflecting the wants and needs of community members, along with the significance of spaces such as “union rep.” and “employment agencies.”³⁰



Map of Nihonmachi in the 1920s.³¹

After discussing the origins of Japanese American life in the United States, the exhibition goes on to display the history of how forced removal and eventual imprisonment occurred. This

³⁰ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 25-27.

³¹ Kazuo Ito, “Map of Nihonmachi in the 1920s” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1920s).

history is often left out in histories of Japanese “internment” but is absolutely vital for Americans to know. Without knowing what societal actions and choices lead up to the creation of concentration camps, we will never be able to stop concentration camps from being created in the future. On Tuesday, April 21, 1942, “evacuation” announcements were posted throughout Seattle. Most Japanese/Japanese American businesses were forced to sell everything they owned in their stores, creating wide-reaching impacts before imprisonment and when they were finally released. In the newspaper shown below, Japanese American business owners describe white competitors buying out their stock at five or ten cents on the dollar. The other photo displays a white man looking in on a window with a 50% “evacuation sale” sign.³²



Seattle Times Article, 1942.³³

Photo of storefront, 1942.³⁴

³² Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 48-50.

³³ “Whites Try to Buy Them Out at Low Price, Say Japanese,” *Seattle Times*, March 6, 1942, Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After.

³⁴ Courtesy Museum of History and Industry, Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, “Storefront of Japanese-Run Business” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, April 1942).

Community members chose to show these images and newspaper clippings to remind viewers that concentration camps can only be created by white passivity and apathy, that while these “evacuation sales” might not have seemed like the beginnings of something horrific, it in fact was. It is so important to be able to recognize these signs because the U.S. government has consistently put racial groups into concentration camps. One of the first examples of this is the Indian Removal Bill of 1830, and one of the most recent examples of this is the Central American immigrants who are being detained at the border in cages. These imprisonments have been and are ordered by the federal government, but have been allowed to occur because of a lack of protest from white Americans. This will only change when smaller injustices, such as the “evacuation sales,” are challenged.

Camp Harmony was another name for the Puyallup Assembly Center or a temporary “camp” where over 7,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned before being relocated by the War Relocation Authority to nearby concentration camps. The exhibition provides an extremely personal look at what life at “Camp Harmony” was like. Oftentimes when reading about the history of Japanese American imprisonment, students look at photos of the “camps,” and of large groups of people. Not only were these photos often staged, but they provide no agency to the people whose histories are being displayed. In the painting seen below, artist Hisashi Hagiya portrays an image of despair and an image of reality. Three women, at least one heavily pregnant, stare at a sign that reads “next bath, 4 pm.” By displaying not only photos from the “camp,” but artistic interpretations of the “camp,” the community members are allowing for a new and more accurate history to be viewed.³⁵ Another image that is often excluded when this history is written about in history books is the fact that the U.S. government exploited the labor

³⁵ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 51-54.

of those it was imprisoning. The image below shows that Japanese Americans were forced to farm land adjacent to the Minidoka camp. This image is especially significant for two reasons. For one, it reminds the viewer of the fact that America *needed* Japanese immigrants to come to the U.S. because of their labor. The image is also significant because forced prison labor is still a common practice today, even though this black-and-white image is reminiscent of the past.



Camp Harmony Latrine, 1942.³⁶



Photos of Japanese American inmates being forced to farm, 1943.³⁷

Another big part of the exhibition that community members decided to focus on was a questionnaire that was sent out in February 1943 to the prisoners. As shown below, the first question asks if the survey-taker is willing to serve in the U.S. Army and the second asks if the survey-taker swore absolute allegiance to the United States. These two questions caused massive conflict among those in the Minidoka concentration camp. Question 28 was especially contentious because, at this point in time, U.S. law did not allow Japanese Americans to become naturalized U.S. citizens. If they were to answer yes to the question, they would be essentially stateless, but if they answered no, they could be tortured or killed. Out of the 78,000 who were imprisoned, 75,000 filled out the questionnaire and only 6,700 answered no to question 28.

³⁶ Hisashi Hagiya, *Camp Harmony Latrine*, 1942, Courtesy Wing Luke Asian Museum, Jack Kudo Collection.

³⁷ Courtesy Maeda Family Collection, "Japanese American Inmates Farm Land Adjacent to Minidoka Camp" (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, c 1943).

While some answered yes to question 27 in hopes of improving the status of their families, most were extremely conflicted. Displaying the survey below demonstrates how contradictory the U.S. government's imprisonment of them was, and also demonstrates the complexities of the choices that imprisoned Japanese Americans had to make.³⁸ Fifty-six Japanese American soldiers from Washington state would die from serving in the U.S. military while their families were imprisoned, because of this questionnaire.³⁹

27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?

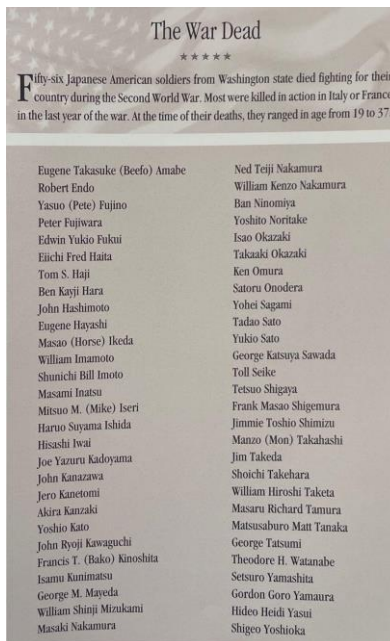
28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?

..... (Date) (Signature)

NOTE.—Any person who knowingly and wilfully falsifies or conceals a material fact or makes a false or fraudulent statement or representation in any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States is liable to a fine of not more than \$10,000 or 10 years' imprisonment, or both.

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 16-32505-1

Government-issued questionnaire, 1943.⁴⁰



List of Japanese American soldiers who were killed in WWII displayed in museum.⁴¹

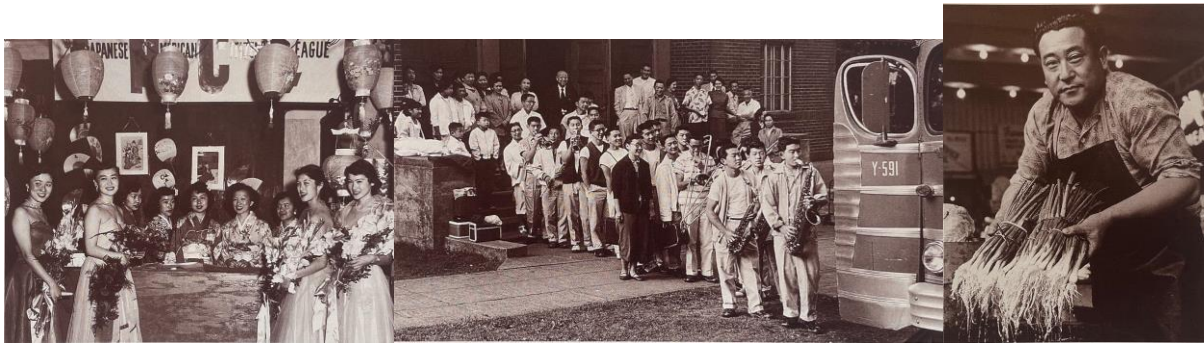
³⁸ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 66-68.

³⁹ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 71.

⁴⁰ "Government-Issued Questionnaire" (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, February 1943).

⁴¹ Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, "The War Dead," n.d.

Along with displaying photos, paintings, and objects that illuminated the histories before imprisonment and during, community members at the Wing Luke Museum also included photos that celebrated the success and survival of Japanese Americans after imprisonment. In the photos seen below a Japanese community queen contest is displayed, the Lotus Skyliners, a popular jazz band is displayed, and the produce of Seiji Hanada is displayed, one of the few Japanese Americans who resumed truck farming after the war. These photos illustrate themes of resilience, survival, and culture, something the narrative of passivity so widely taught negates. It was important for community members to claim these events as historic, because not only was it remarkable that these communities survived imprisonment, but this time period also reflects a great growth in the development of Japanese American culture. Community members chose to not only display images and histories that reflected what was done to *them*, instead also highlighting what they were able to do despite it all.⁴²



Japanese community queen contest, 1950.⁴³ Photo of Lotus Skyliners, 1955.⁴⁴ Photo of Seiji Hanada with his produce.⁴⁵

⁴² Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 76-78.

⁴³ Courtesy Shigeko Uno, "Japanese Community Queen Contest" (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1950).

⁴⁴ Royal C. Crooks photo, "Lotus Skyliners, a Popular Band, Board a Bus for a Concert Tour" (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, August 1955).

⁴⁵ Joseph Scaylea photo, *Seattle Times*, courtesy Mrs. Seiji Hanada, "Seiji Hanada Displays Produce in Front of His Pike Place Market Stall" (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, August 1963).

Lastly, the exhibition highlights the incredible effort by survivors and activists to begin the process of reparations and redress. In 1976 activists were able to get President Ford to issue a formal apology and rescind Executive Order 9066. Soon thereafter the “Day of Remembrance” was created and 2,000 Japanese Americans gathered at the Puyallup Fairgrounds, where they had been forcibly imprisoned decades earlier. In 1979 a bill was proposed to pay \$15,000 to every survivor and although it did not pass, in 1980 another bill was passed that established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. While proposals of reparations were controversial among survivors, the commission served as a place where testimonies could be heard, serving as one of the first spaces of its kind. Because of the tireless efforts of activists as seen below, the Civil Liberties Act was signed by President Reagan in 1988 which acknowledged that the imprisonment of Japanese Americans was “motivated largely by racial prejudice and wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” \$20,000 was given to each survivor and a fund was created to educate the public. Washington state soon followed by paying \$5,000 to 38 Japanese Americans who lost their state jobs during World War II, and in 1986, 26 Japanese American school clerks were paid \$5,000 each.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Takami, *Divided Destiny*, 82-85.



Photo of 5 activists instrumental in the redress plan, 1974.⁴⁷ Assistant Deputy Attorney General presenting a redress check to Frank Yatsu, 1990.⁴⁸ Photo of Bea Kiyohara and daughters at the Day of Remembrance, 1978.⁴⁹



Takahashi, Kino, and Mitsui testify before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1980.⁵⁰

The histories that were displayed in *Executive Order* were purposeful, powerful, and empowering. The photos and artifacts that were chosen to be displayed were chosen because of what they said about history, but also because of their implications in the present. By contextualizing Japanese American imprisonment with the pressing need for labor, the racial covenants that created ghettos, and the refusal to grant American citizenship, much more can be understood about why the concentration camps were created. By also allowing the community members to tell their stories of survival and resilience after imprisonment, the exhibition not only

⁴⁷ John Esaki photo, courtesy JACL, “Shosuke Sasaki, Henry Miyatake, Chuck Kato, Mike Nakata, and Ken Nakano Were Instrumental in the Formation of the 1974 Redress Plan.” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1974).

⁴⁸ Courtesy Akio Yanagihara, “U.S. Assistant Deputy Attorney General James P. Turner Presents a Redress Check to 107-Year-Old Frank Yatsu at the Nisei Veterans Hall, Seattle” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, October 1990).

⁴⁹ Courtesy International Examiner, “Bea Kiyohara with Daughters Joby and Yoko Shimomura Make the Day of Remembrance Pilgrimage to Puyallup” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1978).

⁵⁰ Stan Shikuma photo, “Masao Takahashi, Kusunosuke Kino, and Tak Mitsui Testify at Seattle Central Community College in 1980 before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians” (Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After, 1980).

gave agency back to the people whose history was displayed but a more accurate and comprehensive history was told. Whether we acknowledge it or not, museums legitimize history. They tell viewers that this history is important enough to be mounted on a wall. However, when museums tell inaccurate histories or tell histories *for* communities, they legitimize a false history and tell the community that their version of their own history is not legitimate. By allowing this exhibition to be entirely created by community members, the Wing Luke Museum let community members know that their history, the way they experienced it and remember it, was worthy of being remembered by everyone. The museum created a space for healing, a space for remembering, and a space to help the public not repeat the mistakes of the past.

Case Study #2: Ak-Chin Him-Dak Ecomuseum

“Our ecomuseum is intended to be a place for exchange between generations, each teaching and learning from one another’s special perspectives. Our culture, ever evolving, will continue to be rich and international, crossing borders geographically and through time. The most important part of having our own ecomuseum is that we will be in charge.”⁵¹

-Wendy Aviles, a member of the Ak-Chin Community

The Ak-Chin Indian Community is a community 37 miles south of Phoenix, in what is now known as Arizona. As of the 2020 census, the Ak-Chin Community has 1,070 residents on just over 22,000 acres. In 1512 Spanish colonizers forced a colonial government over the Ak-Chin and nearby nations, but the area was “ceded” to the United States in 1848 following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The Maricopa reservation that the Ak-Chin now resides on was created by President Taft in May of 1912, in which he “gave” the Community 47,600 acres, half

⁵¹ Nancy Fuller, “The Museum As a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project,” in *Museums and Communities*, 2019, <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/the-museum-as-a-vehicle-for-community-empowerment-the-ak-chin-indian-community-ecomuseum-project>, 344.

of which was reduced to the current acreage in under a year. In 1961 the Ak-Chin Indian Community government was “recognized” by the federal government under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.⁵² The Ak-Chin have always been farmers who have lived in permanent settlements in this region but many white historians disagree and say that they practiced hunting and gathering instead. The Ak-Chin, or people at the “mouth of the wash” are a combination of two nations, the Tohono O’odham and the Pima, who combined to protect themselves from Apache raiders.⁵³ Not much else is publicly known about pre-colonial life among the Ak-Chin, but their history is preserved among community members internally.

The 20th century was filled with much success and turmoil for the Ak-Chin people, largely defined by challenges presented by technology, economic development, and the Civil Rights/AIM movement. All of these issues came to a head in the late 80s, with the community needing to come to a consensus over the new economic transformations while simultaneously preserving unique cultural practices. The chair of the council Leona Kakar proposed a museum or archive would be a good way to help younger generations know about their history and encourage them to be proud to be Ak-Chin.⁵⁴ With recent archaeological discoveries in the 1980s, the community was able to rally around their objection to the artifacts being removed by non-Ak-Chin archaeologists to a climate-controlled facility in Tucson. Government officials agreed to return the artifacts if proper storage facilities could be built, which helped foster the idea of creating a Community Museum.

⁵² “Ak-Chin Indian Community | Inter Tribal Council of Arizona,” accessed September 25, 2022, <https://itcaonline.com/member-tribes/ak-chin-indian-community/>.

⁵³ Mary, Stokrocki. “The Ecomuseum Preserves an Artful Way of Life.” *Art Education* 49, no. 4 (1996): 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3193631>, 35.

⁵⁴ Fuller, “The Museum as a Vehicle,” 337-338.

Two community members, Carol Antone, and Eloise Pedro attended museum training classes in August of 1986 at Arizona State University, and with the help of Museum Studies students from that university, and staff at the Pueblo Grande Museum, they were able to develop a few archaeological exhibitions. As community members began visiting these exhibitions, and as they started to develop educational programming for the local students, the community realized that they wanted to build a museum that would serve the needs of the Ak-Chin community, not as a space to inform tourists about the history of the Ak-Chin.⁵⁵

With the knowledge that they wanted to build a museum unlike any other tribal museums in the area, the Ak-Chin reached out to the Smithsonian Institution for advice, who recommended the idea of the structure of an Ecomuseum. Ecomuseums are a type of Community Museum that are defined by their geographic area and the audience they serve, not by a single brick-and-mortar building, or institution. All Community Museums' Collections are organized according to the community's relationship with them, but Ecomuseums take that a step further and organize them around the community's interrelationship with its cultural *and* physical environment.⁵⁶ Ecomuseums also take things a step further in that they do not force all Collections to remain in a storage repository in one of their buildings, but rather usually allow items to stay in their respective homes in the community. Community members are trained on how to best take care of these objects in their homes. Instead of creating an end exhibition or a final physical product, Ecomuseums often focus on giving community members the skills necessary to achieve daily goals.⁵⁷ For example, if someone is interested in running for local

⁵⁵ Fuller, "The Museum as a Vehicle," 346-347.

⁵⁶ Alyce Sadongei, "Connectedness and Relationship: Foundations of Indigenous Ethics Within the Tribal Museum Context," *ICOFOM Study Series*, no. 49-1 (December 18, 2021): 150-58, <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.3447>.

⁵⁷ Fuller, "The Museum as a Vehicle," 330-331.

political office, the “exhibition” of the Ecomuseum would be to provide that individual with the historical context necessary for what running for political office has looked like in that community. Oftentimes, communities that have an Ecomuseum see the museum building as just a meeting space, not as a space to exhibit material culture.⁵⁸ Ecomuseums flip what we understand to be an exhibition upside down.

Historian Nancy Fuller writes about the development of the Ak-Chin Ecomuseum in her chapter, “The Museum As a Vehicle for Community Empowerment: The Ak-Chin Indian Community Ecomuseum Project.” In that chapter, Fuller gives a rare glimpse into how the museum came to be. Fuller explains that with funds from the Administration for Native Americans of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the project was able to create an Ecomuseum project board consisting of community members and museum experts.⁵⁹ The board had to both figure out what the museum would look like, and also figure out a way to communicate to the community that the museum was a space that would be able to serve community needs. Thirty Ak-Chin community members visited Community Museum and Ecomuseums over the continent over the next few years, drawing on ideas and practices developed at these museums.⁶⁰ There was still some resistance in the community over the function of a museum. Some said it reinforced settler colonial structures. Some were unsure of why the community needed it. Elaine Boehm, one of the community members trained in Ecomuseums addressed this conflict by writing:

In our Indian community, our view of a museum is an idea of a closed culture in a box. This is a problem for us as museum technicians and we try to eliminate this type of conflict. So we say, ‘Yes, we can say the word museum, but it has a totally different

⁵⁸ Stokrocki, “The Ecomuseum Preserves,” 40-41.

⁵⁹ “All Active ANA Grants,” accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana/grant-funding/all-active-ana-grants>.

⁶⁰ Fuller, “The Museum as a Vehicle,” 349.

function.’ An ecomuseum can be interpreted the way we want to and we can change it anytime.

This is a start to help our community in preserving today’s information for tomorrow’s generation and along with this, our culture. Though a museum might not be our traditional way of preserving and passing on our culture, our beliefs will always remain the same. The ecomuseum-type concept is a different, modern method that can be used with our traditional ways of life, which has been escaping our community slowly.”⁶¹

While it ended up taking several more years than expected to build the museum's space after the initial staff training, due to shifts in leadership and funding, the Ak-Chin community officially broke ground on November 17, 1990. The staff decided to name the Ecomuseum the *Ak-Chin Him Dak* which translates to “our way of life.” The opening exhibitions consisted of historical objects and artifacts that were excavated on Ak-Chin land, along with the stories of how those objects were able to get to the point of being displayed. While the museum has gone through many changes over the last few decades, especially with the unique challenges presented by COVID-19, the museum is still open and running. It displays crafts, exhibitions, and photographs of Ak-Chin community members.⁶² Exhibitions in homes and public spaces are also still a large part of the museum’s functioning. These exhibitions are usually not advertised to people outside the community. The Ak-Chin community does not rely on the Ecomuseum as a source of income, instead focusing on cultural revitalization and social development.⁶³ Because of that, little can be found about the museum online and much of the content is not available to non-Ak-Chin citizens.

⁶¹ Fuller, “The Museum as a Vehicle,” 340.

⁶² “Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-Museum,” Visit Arizona, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.visitarizona.com/directory/ak-chin-him-dak-eco-museum-american-indian/>.

⁶³ Mustafa Doğan and Dallen Timothy, “Beyond Tourism and Taxes: The Ecomuseum and Social Development in the Ak-Chin Tribal Community,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 18 (March 26, 2019): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2019.1593994>.

In an exhibition entitled, “Through the Eyes of our Youth” which was opened to the public in April of 2017, community members were able to describe the changes they’ve seen in the Ak-Chin community over their lives. Both the perspectives of elders and youth were included and compared to highlight disparities created by technology, policies, and traditions. In the process of curating this exhibition, youth in the community indicated that they wanted to know more about what life was like for the elders, highlighting the powerful truth that museums are more than spaces that just preserve histories in the past, but are spaces which allow connections between the past and the present to grow, creating very real present-day implications. The exhibition contained objects from elder community members, such as traditional dress, wooden telephones, and basketry. Not only does the museum represent the difference between the material culture of the past and the present, but it tells the story of the transformation in education—with elders being forced to attend boarding schools and present-day youth attending nearby public schools.⁶⁴



Photos from the 2017 Exhibition.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Carolyn Sostrom, “Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-Museum Looks to Past and Future with New Exhibit,” Cowboy Lifestyle Network, August 24, 2017, <https://cowboylifestylenetwork.com/ak-chin-him-dak-eco-museum-new-exhibit/>.

⁶⁵ Sostrom, “Ak-Chin Him Dak...”

Looking Beyond: The Unique Capabilities of Museums

In 2012, only 24% of Americans aged 18 or older had visited a historic site in the previous year, and this number only decreases with age.⁶⁶ Why are attendance numbers so low, especially as people get older, with so much of our public tax dollars being spent on these “meaningful institutions?” Museums have failed us, a fact that is not surprising when you learn about the origins of museums as institutions. From the very first Cabinet of Curiosity in the 16th Century, during the dawn of settler-colonialism and European expansion, museums have served the interests of those in power. This might explain why museum attendance numbers are so low, with a concentration on students who attend museums through school field trips. Not only are museums often inaccessible, costly, poorly located, or physically intimidating, but the content inside often discourages people from visiting. What would it look like if you could walk out of a museum feeling empowered, and proud of your heritage? Wealthy white people don’t have to imagine that feeling. They experience it every time they walk into a museum. People of color, queer people, women, and working-class people most often don’t experience that feeling though. History museums, spaces that deem what histories are important, have historically only legitimized certain white-washed histories.

The irony of museums existing as such an exclusive space for so long is that museums allow for historical evidence to be displayed in non-traditional ways. History museums can be the perfect space for histories that are not written down—either because of intentional marginalization or because of a lack of emphasis on writing—to be exhibited. The Community Museum model, a museum that features silenced histories by allowing silenced voices to tell

⁶⁶ Bob Beatty, “Running the Numbers on Attendance at History Museums in the US,” Hyperallergic, March 1, 2018, <http://hyperallergic.com/429788/running-the-numbers-on-attendance-at-history-museums-in-the-us/>.

those histories, has existed for decades. With the founding of the Anacostia Community Museum in 1967 and the global uptick in community-centered museums that thus followed, a framework that allows *all* histories to be told has slowly been developed. This is not to say that Community Museums are the be-all and end-all solution. Under the current system of capitalism that the United States functions in, it is impossible for privately and publicly owned institutions not to have corporate interests. Even the Anacostia Community Museum, a model Community Museum, receives funding from Nestle, a corporation that practices child slavery, trafficking, and labor exploitation.⁶⁷

Although perfection is not possible, progress can be made. The most important change that history museums must make is shifting *who* is creating the exhibitions and *why*. What is the point of learning about a history that has absolutely no relation to you, when you don't have access to clean drinking water when you leave the museum? How can a history be accurate if the curator has no lived/passed down knowledge of the cultural and spiritual implications of a specific object or narrative? Community Museums are essential not only because their exhibitions are more accurate than traditional museums but because just as the historical method excludes certain communities and cultures more often than others, museums do the same. Museums usually have one of two problems. Either the exhibition is telling the story of a victor (most often a white, wealthy, man) or they are telling the history of a marginalized community from an outsider's perspective, which is equally problematic. In both cases, marginalized communities, or communities which do not place as much emphasis on written evidence as white/European cultures do, are being actively silenced. It is through changing *who* has a say in what narratives are told, through shifting *who* has that power, that museums can begin to serve as

⁶⁷ Smithsonian. "Corporate Sponsorship." *Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum*, Smithsonian, <https://anacostia.si.edu/Support/CorporateSponsorship>. Accessed 26 October 2021.; Now deleted.

a space for accurate and representative histories to be told, and for present-day problems to be contextualized in the past.

Chapter 7: *Testimonios* as Voice: Narrating “Subaltern” Histories

What is a *Testimonio*?

The term *testimonio* is used quite frequently in Latin American discourse surrounding silenced histories, political movements, and indigenous rights. If you don't speak Latin American Spanish or have never learned about the histories of *testimonios* before, you might assume that it translates to “testimony” or “testimonial” in English. While that is not entirely wrong, it does not give an accurate picture of the true meaning of a *testimonio*. *Testimonios* have been used as a way to tell histories in Latin America since the 16th century but became a more formalized practice in the 1960s due to an increase in revolutions and the dictatorships that thus followed. While there are several definitions of what a *testimonio* is, almost all experts on the topic agree that *testimonios* exist as a “narrative of denunciation that implies an urgency to narrate.”¹

Professor and Historian Ana Forcinito expands on the many definitions of *testimonios* in her chapter, “*Testimonio: The Witness, the Truth, and the Inaudible*.” One definition of *testimonio* that she describes refers to a narrative that is created in order to regain agency, most often in the situation of needing to make an injustice or oppression known publicly, and quickly. She also explains that *testimonios* can be used to speak out against genocide or group erasure, giving a person in that group the sole voice, instead of a voice through multiple editors. *Testimonios* are considered one of the best ways to “undo the erasure, within official narratives”

¹ George Yudice, “Testimonio and Postmodernism,” *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (1991): 15–31. 17.

of the histories and current practices of groups that are often labeled as “subaltern.” *Testimonios* can address the two main ways in which groups’ histories are erased: either the group is portrayed as invisible and disposable or the violence against the group is downplayed or manipulated.² In both of these instances, an inaccurate history is created to justify or cover up oppression. *Testimonios* were created to reach audiences outside of the *testimonio*-givers’ community. Although in an ideal situation, *testimonios* would be transcribed by the *testimonio*-giver themselves, *testimonios* are most often transcribed (and edited for length and clarity) by scholars who speak a dominant language and had access to university, due to the inequitable conditions created by settler colonialism. It is important for the transcriber/editor to include a statement at the start of the *testimonio* about their positionality and for the reader to remain aware of the fact that they are reading a transcription and in many cases a translation of what was originally said.

While the original definition of *testimonios* as described above was largely centered on first-hand accounts that were written by the person, or dictated to a transcriber, a more broad interpretation of *testimonios* has been adopted in recent years. Today, *testimonios* sometimes include both eyewitness accounts and what many consider to be historical fiction, blurring the line between fact and fiction and calling into question the academic “delineation” that has been created.³ While *testimonios* originally started off being primarily transcribed by college-educated scholars, they are increasingly being told and transcribed by the *testimonio*-giver themselves. This means that *testimonios* sometimes look different than they did in the past, deemphasizing the

² Ana Forcinito, “Testimonio: The Witness, the Truth, and the Inaudible,” in *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought: Historical and Institutional Trajectories*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, and Marisa Belausteguigoitia, *New Directions in Latino American Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 239–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137547903_22. 239.

³ Kathryn M. Smith, “Female Voice and Feminist Text: Testimonio as a Form of Resistance in Latin America,” *Florida Atlantic Comparative Studies Journal* 12, no. 1 (June 2010): 21–38. 22.

“scientific” model created by college-educated transcribers and instead shifting to models that many mainstream scholars deem to look more like historical fiction.

A shift in what *testimonios* look like is not the only change that has occurred in recent decades.⁴ As historian Georg Gugelberger writes, “What happens when counterdiscourse becomes institutionalized” in the U.S. academy?⁵ As Gugelberger described, over the last few decades the structure of *testimonios* has been co-opted by the academy in such a way that the original value of a *testimonio* is lost. There have been a few instances of scholars going into communities and editing the narrative told by the *testimonio*-giver. Luckily, these instances have been rare because it takes an incredibly deep relationship of trust in order to allow a *testimonio* to be transcribed and then published. *Testimonios* go beyond facts or stories. They reveal truths of communities that cannot be revealed unless a certain degree of trust and respect has been established. That is why most *testimonios* have been able to escape the trap of editing or co-opting that many other mediums have fallen victim to.

Disparities can also exist in regards to whether the *testimonio*-teller is telling the story of themselves or their community. Experts disagree on whether it is necessary or not for a person to have been at the specific event they are describing, or whether it is acceptable for one to share the stories of trauma experienced in their community even if they were not at the specific event. This disparity that exists is reflective of a larger disparity that exists between “Western” definitions of science and knowledge and indigenous definitions of knowledge. This conflict was the cause of the controversy behind the *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú that I focused on in my first case study. *Testimonios* were originally created as a way to give marginalized people a way

⁴ Smith, “Female Voices,” 22-23.

⁵ Georg M. Gugelberger, *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). 12.

to tell their community's history in urgent situations. While transcription and translation by college-educated scholars was necessary at first, as more people have access to better education, there will be less of a need for this secondary role. With less of a need for this in-between role, hopefully, many of the components of *testimonios* that "Western" academics have deemed to be unscientific (such as community perspectives or "historical-fiction" components) will be able to be synonymous with *testimonios*. While the definitions of *testimonios* have changed over many years, and certain aspects of *testimonios* have been called into question on many occasions, as a whole *testimonios* serve as a way to translate "the untranslatable or the inaudible."⁶ Increasing amounts of crises in Central America, largely due to the legacy of political intervention on behalf of the United States, are proving to only increase the need and desire among Latin Americans to create *testimonios*.

The first case study I will focus on is one of, if not the most famous *testimonios* of all time. *Me llamo Rigoberto Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* is so significant because it was the first publication from an indigenous perspective on the state-sanctioned genocide being enacted against the various Indigenous nations in Guatemala (what the government calls the "Guatemalan Civil War"). It was the first time that people outside of Guatemala learned about the extreme violence that was being enacted against indigenous populations. The *testimonio* is also extremely significant because it was the first *testimonio* to reach such a large audience. As will be detailed in the case study, Menchú's *testimonio* brought not only the issues of Guatemala into light, but her *testimonio* introduced the concept of a *testimonio* to non-academic circles. That is one of the reasons why there was so much controversy with her *testimonio*, as will be detailed in the case study below. The next case study will focus on a "typical" *testimonio*, shedding light

⁶ Forcinito, "Testimonio: The Witness," 247.

on what the majority of *testimonios* look like. I have also selected this *testimonio* because it tells a history of Honduran resistance that has not been told before. Because there has been less explicit conflict between Honduras and the U.S., there is much less information available to Americans about the *campesino*-Honduran experience, compared to nearby countries like Nicaragua. I believe that the histories that Alvarado details in *Don't Be Afraid Gringo*, are best represented in the medium of a *testimonio*, as compared to a textbook, and that is why I have chosen to focus on it.

Case Study #1: *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*

Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (translated to “my name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is the way my consciousness was born”) and known in English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is one of the most famous and significant *testimonios* of all time. Before the publication of this book in 1983, the genocide being enacted against Indigenous peoples in Guatemala was barely known about outside of Guatemala, despite at least 100,000 Indigenous Guatemalans being brutally killed and “disappeared” (*desaparecido*) by the Guatemalan government. After being forced into exile in 1981, Menchú would travel around the world trying to spread the word of the story of the genocide of her community, the *K'iche'* or Quiché Mayan community, as well as the stories of all Indigenous Guatemalans. While in France, Menchú met Elisabeth Burgos-Debray who eventually would earn Menchú's trust, and transcribe her *testimonio*. Her *testimonio*, which led to Menchú being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, told the story of her upbringing, but also the story of her community, recognizing that *testimonios* function as a call to action, not as a stagnant memoir.⁷ While the title of the book in

⁷ Pam Keeseey, review of *Review of I: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, by Rigoberta Menchú, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, and Ann Wright, *Hypatia* 9, no. 2 (1994): 225–29. 225.

English is *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the accurate translation of the original title in Spanish, addresses the formalization of her consciousness, directly pointing at the teachings of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁸

It is important to note that while Menchú's *testimonio* and award that thus followed as a Nobel Peace Prize winner was incredibly groundbreaking and liberating for Guatemalan Indigenous communities, the work of Menchú was called into question and heavily criticized with the publication of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Store of all Poor Guatemalans* by David Stoll in 1999. In this book, Stoll investigated Menchú's claims and said they were false or fabricated. These claims included her claim about not getting a formal education along with the details of the deaths of her family members.⁹ While many were quick to criticize Menchú, this critique created by Stoll represents a larger issue with centering Indigenous voices and with the format of *testimonios* in Western schools of thought. As Arturo Arias writes in his article, "David Stoll finds her, on the one hand, not Western enough when it comes to the rigor of her logic and her use of facts. He thus accuses her of invention, of fibbing. On the other hand, he finds her too Western in her politics, and he, therefore, claims that her ideas are not representative of what he judges to be authentic "native" Mayan thought."¹⁰ He argues that Menchú is held to an impossible double standard. She has to follow Western modes of historical production, but cannot be too "Western" in her politics, as that would challenge traditional conceptions of indigeneity.

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014).

⁹ Larry Rohter. "Tarnished Laureate - A Special Report. - Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged - Biography; Special Report - NYTimes.Com." *New York Times*, December 15, 1998. <https://web.archive.org/web/20100211171327/https://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/15/world/tarnished-laureate-a-special-report-nobel-winner-finds-her-story-challenged.html>.

¹⁰ Arturo Arias, "Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 75–88. 75.

Arias acknowledges the fluid definition of *testimonios* as addressed at the start of this chapter and states that this fluidity both makes *testimonios* seem less “scientific” in the Western canon, but more usable amongst Indigenous ways of thinking. Arias argues that *testimonios* were never designed to be a sworn testimony but rather a “collective, communal account of a person’s life.”¹¹ As Menchú states in the beginning of her *testimonio*:

*Quisiera dar este testimonio vivo que no he aprendido en un libro y que tampoco he aprendido sola ya que todo esto lo he aprendido con mi pueblo y es algo que yo quisiera enfocar. Me cuesta mucho recordarme toda una vida que he vivido, pues muchas veces hay tiempos muy negros y hay tiempos que sí, se goza también pero lo importante es, yo creo, que quiero hacer un enfoque que no soy la única pues ha vivido mucha gente y es la vida de todos. La vida de todos, los guatemaltecos pobres y trataré de dar un poco mi historia. Mi situación personal engloba toda la realidad de un pueblo.*¹²

This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. It’s hard for me to remember everything that’s happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.¹³

Menchú is explaining that this *testimonio* is a history of her community, a space in which she can give voice to the people who have been silenced around her. Stoll’s argument that Menchú fabricated her story is an attack on Menchú as an individual and an attack on non-Western ways of thought as a whole.¹⁴ The Nobel Peace Prize committee recognized this and did not take away her award despite calls to do so. Rigoberta Menchú is still alive today and ran for president of Guatemala in 2007 and 2011, under the country’s first Indigenous political party, Winaq, which

¹¹ Arias, “Authorizing Ethnicized Subjects,” 76.

¹² Elisabeth Burgos Debray, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, Primera edición, 21. reimpresión, Historia inmediata (México, D.F: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2013). 21.

¹³ Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, 2nd English-language ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2009). 1.

¹⁴ John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative),” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 11–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0923>. 12.

she founded.¹⁵ Lastly, it is important to note that this *testimonio* has gone through roughly three translations. Menchú did not speak almost any Spanish up until three years before the book was published and the only changes Elizabeth Burgos-Debray made were to correct gender pronoun mistakes.¹⁶ Other than that, it is her exact words throughout. Her *testimonio* was translated into English a few years later by Ann Wright, making it the third translation of Menchu's original thoughts. Because of that, I try to use the Spanish version as evidence, and supplement it with English when necessary, in order to remove one round of translation.

While Menchú's *testimonio* documents many *K'iche'* practices that had never been put on paper or heard outside of *K'iche'* circles before, such as traditions around birth and marriage, her *testimonio* also highlights all that went into the counter-resistance organizing against the Guatemalan government, information that had not been documented in non-guerilla circles up to this point. Rigoberta's father was jailed several times because he refused to pay rent to the *ladino* (what we would understand to be latine) landowners who claimed the altiplano Rigoberta's family lives on belonged to them. After several arrests, Rigoberta and her siblings decided to form the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) to unify against the *ladinos* that were taking advantage of them.¹⁷ As Rigoberta's community started to make plans to create a unified front against the soldiers coming into their community to enforce unjust land claims, Rigoberta's stressed that 100% of the organizing had to be done in secret. Not a thing could be recorded on paper in case it was found and luckily for her community, this was not the normal way of doing things in the first place.¹⁸ Not only were the plans of the guerillas not recorded on paper, but

¹⁵ "Rigoberta Menchú Tum Guatemala," Nobel Women's Initiative, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://www.nobelwomensinitiative.org/rigobertamenchutum>.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Burgos Debray, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, Primera edición, 21. reimpresión, Historia inmediata (México, D.F: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2013). 7.

¹⁷ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 136.

¹⁸ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 163.

large massacres were often not written about as well.¹⁹ It was only in 1997 after the publication of Menchu's *testimonio* and calls to look into the atrocities further that the "Truth Commission: Guatemala" reported that government officials committed 93% of the human rights abuses (3% by the guerillas) totaling at least 200,000 deaths.²⁰ If Menchú had not spoken her *testimonio* which caused global outrage and calls to investigate, the true numbers would likely have remained silenced and never formally recorded.

Menchú's documentation of the organizing that went into the CUC was the first written documentation of its time. The first article of text that even addressed the history of the CUC was written in 1987, four years after Menchu's *testimonio*, and was written by an anthropologist who is not Guatemalan in *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*. In Guatemala, there were no newspaper publications that described the perspectives or strategies of the guerilla fighters. Even "objective" descriptions of massacres, such as the massacre that occurred in Panzós on May 29th, 1978 were few and far to come by. Rigoberta argues that the descriptions of the massacres weren't interesting enough for *ladinos* and newspapers accordingly stopped publishing them. Even when an event was covered, such as in the original newspaper article shown below, it was said that 35 people died. We now know it was over 200.²¹ Without Menchú's account of the massacre and the call for truth, this newspaper article would have been considered fact even today.

¹⁹ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 186.

²⁰ United States Institute of Peace. "Truth Commission: Guatemala," February 1, 1997. <https://www.usip.org/publications/1997/02/truth-commission-guatemala>.

²¹ Pedro Julio Garcia, "1978: Masacre de Panzós, Terrible Pasaje Del Conflicto," *Prensa Libre*, June 2, 1978, <https://www.prensalibre.com/hemeroteca/masacre-de-panzos-en-1978/>.



Newspaper the day after the massacre. The title roughly translates to: “The neighbors of Panzos make vivid accounts of the events on Monday.”²²

Menchú extensively details the plans that went into developing the guerilla tactics that her community and others used to defend their land. She also talks about the contradiction that she and others faced in letting their stories be known. She writes:

*Hacer como que si no pensáramos nada. Pero cuando estamos entre nosotros los indígenas, sabemos discutir, sabemos pensar y sabemos opinar. Lo que pasa es, que como no nos han dado el espacio de palabra, no nos han dado el espacio de hablar, de opinar, y de tomar en cuenta nuestras opiniones, nosotros tampoco hemos abierto la boca por gusto....Pero, sin embargo, nosotros hemos ocultado nuestra identidad porque hemos sabido resistir, hemos sabido ocultar lo que el régimen ha querido quitarnos.*²³

We pretend we’re not thinking of anything. But when we’re all together, amongst ourselves, we discuss, we think, we give our views. What happens is that, since we’ve never been given the opportunity to speak, express our opinions, or have our views considered, we haven’t bothered to make ourselves heard just for the fun of it...But we have hidden our identity because we needed to resist, we wanted to protect what governments have wanted to take away from us.²⁴

Rigoberta’s *testimonio* addresses the contradiction that she had to deal with in order to preserve the sacredness of keeping her community's secrets safe as her ancestors had done for millennia, while also making sure her community’s voices aren’t silenced in a world that is growing to only place value on voices that are loud. Rigoberta states in the beginning that it is her duty to keep the secrets of their community safe, generation after generation, and to prevent *ladinos* from

²² “1978 Masacre de Panzos.”

²³ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 196.

²⁴ Debray, *I Rigoberta Menchú*, 199-200.

learning the meaning of their ancestors' ways.²⁵ Not only did they have to keep their histories safe, but they had to make sure that false histories that were created during colonialism, ideas which subjugated the *K'iche'* were not pervasive.²⁶ At the same time though, part of the reason why the Guatemalan government and *ladino* landowners could get away with so much brutality, however, is because they were relying on the fact that the *K'iche'* would remain silent.

Rigoberta wanted to be able to share the brutalities that were being committed against her communities, to legitimize her communities as *people*, without ignoring the tradition of preserving secrets generationally that her ancestors had practiced. She did this by not adopting traditional forms of historical preservation. She does not show up at the front door of the newspaper agency and demands the proper number of those killed to be recorded. She does not publish a written diary about her own experience. Rigoberta speaks. She speaks the truth of not only herself but her community. She speaks in a way that allows herself to be the agent of her history. She allows certain traditions to remain silent, but certain atrocities to be spoken aloud. Rigoberta rejects Eurocentric forms of historical preservation and turns to *testimonios* to preserve the true histories of those around her.

Case Study #2: *Don't Be Afraid Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart: the Story of Elvia Alvarado*

Don't Be Afraid Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart: the Story of Elvia Alvarado published in 1987 just four years after *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, is a *testimonio* transcribed and translated by activist Medea Benjamin that tells the story of Elvia Alvarado, a Honduran human rights activist. While the *testimonio* tells the story of Elvia's life, similar to most *testimonios*, it is also the story of her community, for whom she identifies as *campesinos*

²⁵ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 93.

²⁶ Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, 92.

(roughly translated to peasant farmers). Unlike Menchú's testimonio, transcriber Medea Benjamin was told that she would have to "...go out with me and see where I work, how I get there, where I sleep, how the people I work with live. Otherwise, you'll never know if I'm telling the truth." Not only did Medea experience much of what Elvia discussed in person, but Benjamin was able to gain Elvia's trust through the experiences they shared.²⁷ Medea, Elvia, and others went back and forth on whether they should publish this transcription, fearing for the life of Elvia and her coworkers. Eventually, Elvia reached her decision, saying:

"...I decided that I couldn't pass up a chance to tell the world our story. Because our struggle is not a secret one, it's an open one. The more people who know our story the better. Even if you are a gringa, I thought, once you understand why we're fighting, if you have any sense of humanity, you'll have to be on our side."²⁸

This statement highlights the key distinguishing feature of a *testimonio*. *Testimonios* are written as a way to raise awareness or raise consciousness of an oppression that is occurring. They do not claim to be neutral and are not created with the sole intent of "preserving history." Elvia wrote this *testimonio* as a call to action for people all around the world who did not know the true experiences of *campesinos* in Honduras.

While Elvia highlights many instances of histories that are rarely told, such as her role in the formation of CNTC (*Central Nacional de Trabajadores del Campo*), or the national union of rural workers, she also discusses ways in which *campesinos* around her are either not preserved or inaccurately preserved. Elvia talks about the fact that most *campesinos* get their information from radio stations, instead of newspapers because many of them cannot read or afford a newspaper. Similar to the experience of Rigoberta, Elvia remembered several examples of an

²⁷ Elvia Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart: The Story of Elvia Alvarado* (Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1987). Xxii.

²⁸ Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid Gringa*, xiii.

event she went through being written about incorrectly in a newspaper. In one example, when tensions were high between the *campesinos* who were organizing into labor unions and the landowners, the newspaper wrote that the *campesinos* attacked the landowner, abused his managers, and were armed with weapons from Nicaragua (using anti-Nicaraguan communism sentiment to draw an association with the non-politically affiliated *campesinos* in Honduras). This is not to say that the *campesinos* or Elvia just let the newspapers get away with this. She writes about how she and her coworkers tried on multiple occasions to rectify these false claims in newspapers, but how they were unable to do anything because they did not have enough money to take out counter-ads, which was the only way to challenge articles at the time.²⁹ Not only do the newspapers often print stories that completely exclude *campesino* voices, but by writing “Campesinos invade such and such pieces of land” the newspapers are un-writing the truth of this history: the fact that these pieces of land never belonged to the landholders in the first place.³⁰

One specific example of this is how newspapers reported the Los Horcones Massacre or the *Masacre de Los Horcones* in 1975. While newspapers of this time are hard to access in the United States, a documentary circulating on Facebook in Honduras that won many awards in Latin America when it was published in 2020, called *Documental La Masacre de La Talanquera, Santa Clara y Los Horcones* has many clips of newspapers from this incident, most of which highlight bias in how the event was recorded.³¹³² The *Masacre de Los Horcones* was a massacre

²⁹ Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid Gringa*, 63.

³⁰ Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid Gringa*, 69.

³¹ *Documental-Masacre Talanquera, Santa Clara y Los Horcones*. Documentary, 2020.

³² A note on Latin American archival newspaper access in the United States. The majority of newspaper clippings preserved in university archives from Honduras in the late 20th Century are *exceptions* to the political ideology most newspapers represented at the time. These newspapers are preserved because they represent resistance to government restrictions, causing the actual newspapers to be historic. This creates a narrative that is not wholly reflective of what most Hondurans were reading in newspapers at the time. Most Hondurans had access to non-revolutionary newspapers, to newspapers that were aligned

in 1975 where 14 religious leaders, *campesinos*, and students were massacred by the Honduran military.³³ While those responsible for the massacre were eventually given light prison sentences five years later, the original coverage of the event often placed more blame on the *campesinos* and those protesting unfair land holding, than the government and those who committed the massacre. This can be seen in the newspaper clipping below, which reads “Land invasion orders came out of Tegucigalpa from those affiliated to the UNC (*Unión Nacional de Campesinos*).” One of the main headlines after the massacre at the time is saying that the UNC caused the land invasion, removing emphasis from what the government did and placing emphasis on justified protest from the UNC.



“Land invasion orders came out of Tegucigalpa from those affiliated to the UNC.”³⁴

While it might seem like a good thing to cover what kind of protest strategies the *campesinos* were practicing, newspaper headlines like this created a narrative that portrayed the *campesinos* as instigators, as responsible for the massacre, when this is not true. Elvia highlights the complexities that occurred due to these kinds of headlines in her *testimonio*, giving a voice to the *campesinos* which newspapers purposefully excluded.

with the government. These newspapers have not been the focus of preservation in the United States, causing a gap in knowledge and documentation of *what* “normal” newspapers were documenting at the time. These “normal” newspapers are better preserved in Honduras, but are not accessible digitally to academics in the United States. This is another reason why *testimonios* can be more accurate than preserved newspapers for historians outside of Honduras.

³³ “Recuerdan Masacre de Los Horcones Con Misa,” *La Prensa*, June 25, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090710053835/http://www.laprensahn.com/Pa%C3%ADs/Ediciones/2009/06/26/Noticias/Recuerdan-masacre-de-Los-Horcones-con-misa>.

³⁴ “Documental Masacre,” 14:39.

Newspapers were not only problematic forms of historical preservation for *campesinos* because they rarely featured voices who could not pay to be featured, but also because they were oftentimes politically dangerous to even buy. Elvia describes this when she was questioned by the DNI, the National Department of Investigations. She describes in horror in her *testimonio* the realization that she had a Nicaraguan newspaper in her backpack. Elvia said that she very rarely even bought or read Nicaraguan newspapers because of the political implications they carried. If a Honduran government official caught her with one, that would be enough to arrest her on suspicion of sedition or sympathy for the communist effort. When she was caught with one, she was tortured for many days and accused of aligning with communism and the opposing neighboring government. While Elvia survived this torture, largely in part because she had some connections that knew her legal rights, many other *campesinos* never even dared to take the risk.³⁵

This raises the question, how can newspapers be an accurate form of historical representation if whole groups of people cannot even read them? Elvia and others were able to comment on the falsities in newspapers they had access to, but there were hundreds if not thousands of publications describing historical events in Central America that they did not have access to or could not read. However, as historians in the present day, we often look to newspapers as a representation of what the “people” were saying. With politics surrounding the Red Scare, newspapers had to be entirely biased towards one end of the political spectrum. That is why it is so important to contextualize newspaper articles within the voices of people who were not represented. That is also why it is so important to elevate non-government-controlled sources of historical preservation, such as *testimonios*. Elvia was able to preserve a history of her

³⁵ Alvarado, *Don't Be Afraid Gringa*, 129.

community that would be impossible to preserve through newspapers, radio transcripts, letters, or governmental reports due to the anti-communist and anti-labor movement politics of her time.

***Testimonios* as Evidence: An Alternative to Edited Writing**

Some might wonder how *testimonios* differ from traditional written evidence. One of the biggest ways the two differ is in whose *voice* is being represented. In a newspaper article, what we see as a reader has gone through many steps in order to be published or is often censored by the politics of the time. Not only are these steps problematic though, but newspapers convey a false sense of objectivity, or they are seen as a restatement of the facts by the general public, instead of an interpretation. Even in written evidence that does not go through this step, however, such as the case of a journal entry, there is no unified goal or voice among all writers of the world. In creating a *testimonio* though, there is a unified voice, there is clear intent. As Forcinito describes, *testimonios* are written to demand justice or reparations, to construct collective memory, or reconstruct knowledge through languages and identities that have been lost or silenced.³⁶ The latter is more significant in terms of understanding how *testimonios* are a unique form of evidence that should be used in the historical method. *Testimonios* often speak for a collective, challenging Western values and conceptions of history preservation in every aspect, countering the hyper-individualistic culture in white-American society. This is not to say that speaking for a collective should not be challenged but is rather a component of *testimonios* that has benefits and negatives, like all sources. *Testimonios* are written with the explicit goal to tell and preserve a history that allows the reader to better understand voices that have been actively silenced. They are not objective in the sense of what we understand to be objective, as the intent is part of the evidence itself. As Hugo Achugar writes, *testimonios* are “a form of narrating the

³⁶ Forcinito, “Testimonio: The Witness,” 240.

story of a world that provides an alternative to the monologic historiographical discourse in power.”³⁷

Testimonios also serve as a way to translate silenced voices into Western languages and models of representation.³⁸ This idea can be broken down into three broad categories. The first is the idea that many concepts in certain languages, specifically in indigenous languages, cannot be directly translated into words in English or Spanish. Because it is not easy to translate many words and concepts, it is easy for them to be lost as English and Spanish are prioritized, as well as while histories are being written in these languages. *Testimonios* provide a way for larger concepts to be remembered and translated, as one can use a whole *testimonio* to translate a single concept. Another reason why *testimonios* can preserve histories in ways that many traditional forms of historical preservation can not, is because the act of formalized writing was not practiced by many cultures and communities, specifically in the Americas. Newspapers (the way Europeans understand them to be) did not exist in pre-colonial Indigenous societies. Written down journal entries were also not a way in which most indigenous communities preserved their histories. *Testimonios* allow for more of an alignment between past practices and the present. It is not a form of written evidence created by Europeans that non-Europeans are being forced to practice, but a new form of preservation that gives agency to the writers. Lastly, *testimonios* are distinct because they allow for histories of extreme genocide and trauma to be documented in ways that other forms of preservation cannot. This is why creating *testimonios* were such a significant form of historical preservation among Holocaust survivors.³⁹

³⁷ Forcinito, “Testimonio: The Witness,” 240.

³⁸ Arturo Arias, “Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 75–88.

³⁹ Ricardo Forster, *El laberinto de las voces argentinas* (Ediciones Colihue SRL, 2008). 169.

Testimonios have also been adopted as a methodology in LatCrit. LatCrit or Latine Critical Theory was first introduced in 1995, a sort of extension or narrowing of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), as a way to challenge the silencing of Latinas in the U.S. LatCrit is focused on creating change through the community, focusing on both scholarship and activism and is very closely aligned with the broader movement, Critical Race Theory (CRT).⁴⁰ Many LatCrit scholars have said that academic production that focuses primarily on Eurocentric epistemologies creates an *apartheid of knowledge* in academia. In order to challenge that, LatCrit scholars have turned to methodologies such as *testimonios*, to broaden their theoretical, methodological, and epistemological practices.⁴¹ LatCrit Theorist Lindsay Pérez Huber identified five ways in which LatCrit and *testimonios* overlapped, including the idea of revealing injustices caused by oppression, challenging dominant Eurocentric ideologies, validating experiential knowledge, acknowledging the power of human collectivity, and committing to racial and social justice.⁴² These overlapping tenets that LatCrit and *testimonios* share can also be applied to the discipline of History. These five tenets should be tenets that Historians also integrate into their practice, to prevent the “apartheid of knowledge” that causes histories to be inaccurate and not representative of the greater U.S. population.

Such as in the case of Elvia Alvarado and Rigoberta Menchú, there are clear examples of written evidence going awry. This is not because newspapers were against their causes, or because of a lack of effort from their communities. In situations where silenced voices are the

⁴⁰ Francisco Valdes, “Legal Reform and Social Justice: An Introduction to LatCrit Theory, Praxis and Community,” *Griffith Law Review* 14, no. 2 (January 2005): 148–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10383441.2005.10854554>. 148-150.

⁴¹ Lindsay Pérez Huber, “Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: *Testimonio* as Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 6 (November 2009): 639–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903333863>. 640.

⁴² Huber, “Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge,” 645.

most important, in instances of civil wars, genocide, and massive governmental oppression, it is impossible to preserve histories of the oppressed using the methods of the oppressors. Those whose power is being stripped away had to adopt a new way of preserving their histories in a way that centered their voices. Not only do *testimonios* allow marginalized groups to preserve their histories, however, but they create a future precedent. They are a call to action. The very basis of a *testimonio* is not neutral. *Testimonios* function as a way to convey the historical, present-day, and future implications of a group to the general public, in one, accessible form of consumption. They liberate the community that is giving the *testimonio*, but they also liberate the reader/listener. Through listening to what has happened in the past, through listening to how these histories are affecting the future, *testimonio*-givers, and *testimonio*-receivers can come together to create a different history for the future.

Conclusion: Looking Beyond: History in Our Own Lives

Land as History: A Pipeline That Could Not be Stopped by Humans Alone

In the Summer of 2022, I was lucky enough to be hired as an intern at the Zinn Education Project, a history education nonprofit founded by Howard Zinn, and an organization I had looked up to for many years. While I worked on many different projects at ZEP, one of my main projects was finding supplementary resources for the Report on Reconstruction that had just been released. My boss tasked me with finding local histories in states whose histories during Reconstruction were not as well known – states like Utah, Wyoming, and Nebraska. I was supposed to find histories that illuminated themes around Reconstruction, histories that teachers in these states could teach in their classrooms. It was during this time that I found a story that stopped me in my tracks: the story of White Buffalo Girl. Unbeknownst to me, this story would bring me all the way to rural Nebraska, to the farm that grew the corn that stopped a pipeline. Even more, the history I discovered while researching White Buffalo Girl, and the histories I learned in the small town of Neligh Nebraska, would serve as the largest catalyst for this thesis.

In 1887, the Ponca Nation were driven out of their ancestral lands in what is now known as Northern Nebraska and forcibly marched to a reservation in Oklahoma by the Federal Government.¹ A few days into this forced displacement, an 18-month-old girl named White Buffalo Girl died. Because of the nature of the forced relocation, White Buffalo Girl's family was not able to bury her in accordance with their traditional customs. Her family ended up having no choice but to bury her in a Christian cemetery in Neligh, Nebraska, where her father,

¹ Mark van de Logt. "Ponca." In *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=PO007>.

Black Elk, asked local residents to watch over the grave through a translator. He pleaded, “I want the whites to respect the grave of my child just as they do the graves of their own dead. We don’t like to leave the graves of [our] ancestors but we had to move and hope it will be for the best. I leave the grave in your care. I may never see it again. Care for it for me.”² Surprisingly, his wishes were honored — the grave has been carefully stewarded over the last 146 years by Neligh residents and has become a fixture of the local community.



The White Buffalo Girl gravesite at the cemetery in Neligh.³

In the early 2010s, Art Tanderup, a retired teacher-turned-farmer in Neligh, and his wife Helen learned that the Keystone XL pipeline would be constructed to go through their farm. The Keystone XL pipeline was designed to transport oil from Alberta Canada to the Gulf Coast of Texas. Not only would the construction of the pipeline displace Art and thousands of other farmers and disturb tribal lands, but it would cross “Nebraska’s Ogallala Aquifer, which provides drinking water for millions as well as 30 percent of America’s irrigation water.”⁴ If a spill did

² Scott Stark. “The Legacy of White Buffalo Girl, and the Resiliency of a People.” *America’s Trails*, June 4, 2021. <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2021/june/04/the-legacy-of-white-buffalo-girl-and-the-resiliency-of-a-people/>.

³ Picture of me at the gravesite, taken by Ella Norman on July 15, 2022.

⁴ Courtney Lindwall. “What Is the Keystone XL Pipeline?” *NRDC* (blog), March 15, 2022. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/what-keystone-xl-pipeline#whatis>.

occur, which was historically the case, all of the water in the aquifer, and any nearby rivers that flowed into other states would be contaminated. Art, who had just moved onto his wife’s family’s farm to retire after teaching high school history in Omaha, decided to host a “Bold Nebraska” medicine wheel camp on their farm, where local white farmers, Ponca Nation members, and other Native peoples from the area gathered to figure out a way to stop the pipeline.

At this four-day event, Art met Mekasi Horinek, a member of the Ponca Nation. Mekasi shared with Art that his grandfather had been on the Ponca Trail of Tears and had probably walked right by the farm. He explained to Art that what made the forced removal even more horrific was that the Ponca Nation were not allowed to take with them their freshly harvested corn — the crop that would have not only sustained them for the rest of the year but a crop that was sacred to the nation. Mekasi got the idea to try to locate some of the original seed and, incredibly, found that some of the original seed from the harvest that had been left behind had been preserved in a medicine bundle by the Lakota Nation—who had moved onto the land the Ponca were forced to vacate. Art agreed to plant the red corn, expecting that century-old corn would not grow. It did just the opposite, however. It flourished.⁵



A red corn stalk a few months away from harvest. A bucket of fried corn from a variety of types. A dried red corn ear.⁶

⁵ Stark, “The Legacy of,” 2021.

⁶ Pictures taken by me on July 15, 2022.

In large part because of the growth of the red corn and the solidarity it fostered, Art and others were able to stop the pipeline from encroaching on their land and tainting their water. The red corn that grew attracted people from all over and was a large reason why President Biden was able to successfully veto the construction of the pipeline in 2021. Art then ceded a large portion of his land back to the Ponca Nation, returning it to its rightful stewards. He stated, “Our ancestors did something clearly wrong. We hope we can be a small part of making it right. Knowing that we’re giving the land to people who might take care of it even better than we could is something powerful.”⁷

Pipelines, in many ways, can represent the evils of settler colonialism. They monetize and take ownership of land that is stewarded by other people, they degrade the environment and pollute bodies of water, they accelerate our reliance on oil and unsustainable forms of energy, and they disproportionately affect Indigenous nations. The fact that the original corn, something so sacred to the Ponca Nation and most Indigenous nations, was able to speak from the past, should not be ignored and should remind us of the importance of preserving the knowledge of our ancestors. Humans have tried for decades, if not centuries, to record and preserve history in a way that might prevent atrocities from reoccurring; however, we have been largely unsuccessful. The land in the small town of Neligh Nebraska was able to do so though. How can we take a page out of the playbook of Land and truly preserve history and listen to history, to make sure that these atrocities don’t keep happening over and over again?

Coincidentally, I was going on a cross-country road trip with my friend this summer and planning on driving through Nebraska. I checked Google Maps and saw that Neligh would be a six-hour detour, but I still sent the article to my friend in hopes I could convince her to go. She

⁷ Stark, “The Legacy of,” 2021.

immediately responded that we had to visit the gravesite, so we sat down to rebook our hotels and add it to our itinerary. A few days before leaving for the trip, I had the impulse to email Art and see if we could meet during my trip. I Googled around for a while before I found what I thought was his email. I tentatively introduced myself, and Art immediately responded and invited us to visit him on his farm. Shocked by the turn of events, I was so excited to be able to meet Art and see the field in person.

A week later, we were driving up a mile-long driveway in what seemed like middle-of-nowhere Nebraska. Art was sitting on his front porch and immediately told us to get on his ATV. Two suburban girls, wearing our Birkenstocks and crop tops, jumped on his ATV, and he took us to the sacred red cornfield. Art spent a lot of time describing how corn reproduction worked and explaining the difficulties presented by this year's drought. It was clear that the red corn was not like the other corn on the farm. It was far shorter and, as Art noted, each stalk had its own personality. He explained that this corn was engineered for eating: it was tasty and nutritious, unlike the other corn grown nearby.

While the history of the farm moved me in many ways, what might be the most powerful lesson is the *method* in which this history was preserved. Without Mekasi's grandfather's story which he passed down to his grandson and without the land that preserved the history, we would have no chance of using this history against the pressing forces of settler colonialism. By widening our conception of what historical preservation looks like, we make room for more methods to reveal to us more histories. The red corn was not supposed to have survived the forced displacement that the Ponca nation had to endure, let alone grow 150 years later, but it did. Not only did it grow, but it preserved the history of forced relocation and stopped a forced relocation from happening again in the present. All of the methods described in this thesis—

wampum belts, quilts, oral traditions, music, museums, and *testimonios*—preserve histories that have been historically excluded from the archive. However they also do the same as the land did in Neligh: they preserve histories not just for the sake of preservation, but in an attempt to prevent the mistakes from the past from reoccurring in the present.

What All These Methods Have in Common

While the idea that the methods described in this thesis can be used to preserve history is not an idea I invented myself, my argument rests in what we can understand about these methods through analyzing them comparatively and complementarily. While many of us have probably experienced at least one of these methods before, the argument that these methods must be used alongside written evidence is strengthened by analyzing the *similarities* between these methods. Going into this thesis, I was not sure what similarities I would find. I picked the chapters because of their relation to me, and although I knew that they must share similarities with each other in some ways, I was not sure how. After researching all six methods, along with researching the history of History as a discipline and the corresponding false narratives perpetuated, I now have a much better understanding of why these methods are so important.

Perhaps the largest similarity between the methods I described is the space they create for healing. While many of us can probably conceptualize historical narratives that have empowered us or allowed us to look at ourselves differently, not so many of us have been able to articulate the ways in which the physical act of preserving history can allow us to heal. Specifically in the case of researching quilts created by Black women, Community Museums, and *testimonios*, I found the same narrative repeated over and over again: these methods provided space for necessary healing to begin. These three methods, in particular, are methods that were developed not just as a way to preserve histories that have been silenced and ignored by the archive, but

also as a way to reckon with the histories in which they are preserving. How could these methods be incorporated into history classrooms not only to be taught about but for students to use while reckoning with such painful histories? What would happen if teachers found a quiet hour every day for students to work collaboratively and creatively among each other, or if teachers gave students the agency to design and curate an exhibition about something important to their community? What would happen if students who suffered great losses or trauma were given a platform to preserve the histories of what really happened and be told that their lives really do matter?

A theme also present across all of the methods I researched was the idea of kinship. In the quest for “objectivity,” the professionalization of History, the role of kinship in historical preservation has been ignored and cast aside. All six of the methods that I described, to various degrees, are influenced by kinship. Wampum belts are almost always passed down in families and are usually the most relevant to the family to which they belong to. Families have been able to record their own family histories through wampum belts, allowing the beads to serve as mnemonic devices to preserve shockingly accurate family histories. In quilting, many quilters learn how to quilt from their mothers and share similar quilting styles with family members. This is best illustrated in the case of the women of Gee’s Bend, where whole neighborhoods were able to be reconstructed due to similar motifs in quilts. While families usually have some shared motifs, the differences that exist in each generation are just as historically important. They can reveal the influence of new family members, community members, or of significant events. Oral traditions that are passed down around the dinner table among Italian Americans are perhaps the best example of the themes of kinship present in each of these methods. These histories are *only* preserved because of the role and importance of the family.

An idea present in many of the chapters that must be addressed is the label of “Folk Studies” that so many of these methods have been branded with. While it is not necessarily false that these methods are categorized as such, this categorization has allowed historians to ignore these methods and has allowed these methods not to be displayed in their historical contexts. When visiting the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. for example, art that uses methods such as quilting, or art by “untrained” artists (largely artists of color) is tucked away at the back of the first floor, whereas an entire exhibition displaying the portraits of former presidents gets its own wing and pamphlet. By deeming a method as something that belongs to Folk Studies, historians are not only ignoring a whole set of useful information, but they are casting the experiences of people of color aside, relegating them to the exhibition people didn’t even know existed. Historians must embrace the methods displayed in Folk Studies as History, in order to tell truly accurate and representative narratives.

Another incredibly important theme that I uncovered during my months of research is the power of agency. Historians must acknowledge that form can sometimes be just as important as content. Even if we begin to tell more representative histories, if we begin to grapple with the true horrors created by enslavement, for example, we are confronted with the reality that the majority of sources used were written *about* enslaved people. In the history of the United States, some of the most important histories were not recorded with pen and paper. While it is important to talk about these histories, we must go a step further. Incorporating sources that were created by the people or the ancestors of the people who experienced the event, not only makes the content more accurate but proves to the people whose history is being discussed that their voices matter, that they are in control of their own histories. Relating back to the theme of healing, agency is essential in beginning to teach histories that have so long been ignored. While some

historians such as James Sweet argue that history must be approached objectively, without acknowledging the sociopolitical implications of the present, I argue that an accurate history cannot be told without recognizing the impacts of the present day. History can be a discipline that evokes healing. It can be a discipline that begins to undo the mistakes of the past. Perhaps most importantly though, history can be preserved by everyone, in a multitude of ways. Through the study of the past, we can begin to move forward, confident that we have learned and grown.

Beyond This Thesis: Envisioning Other Methods

“That’s the problem with history, we like to think it’s a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn’t the paper it’s printed on. It’s memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you.”⁸

-Paul Beatty

Before concluding this thesis, I must address an irony that some readers have probably noticed and an irony that one of my advisors so astutely acknowledged. While my thesis is centered around the idea that history in many instances is best conveyed through non-written methods, this thesis is in fact, written. This was an irony that I first conceptualized in the summer of 2022, just before I started writing this thesis. I explored the possibility of displaying this thesis in a multitude of mediums. What would this thesis look like as a quilt? What would this thesis look like as a meal? As a spoken *testimonio*? While considering the possibility of these different mediums, as well as analyzing the practical restrictions present (completing this thesis in the History department, only having one academic year to complete it, etc), I came to the conclusion that a written thesis that explored the ways in which writing was problematic was necessary. What better way to prove a point, than to use the method in question against itself? Those who

⁸ Paul Beatty. *The Sellout*. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

are open to the idea of seeing History in a multitude of ways would have no issues with consuming my thesis via a quilt, song, or wampum belt. What about those who are weary of this different conceptualization of History though? Those who are unsure of whether a meal can truly constitute History? One of the goals of this thesis was to answer this question for those people. To prove through a written History thesis, that writing is not always the best option.

For those who have been lucky enough to see History all around them, this thesis serves as a form of validation. Those conversations you had with your grandmother at the dinner table, those quilts so cherished by your family, those songs that make you feel seen and heard, are valid and necessary forms of history. For the communities that have been advocating for these methods to be acknowledged for what they are for decades, I hope this thesis makes you feel seen. For those who have been valiantly advocating for their histories to be taught, I hope this thesis makes you feel heard. Most importantly though, to everyone reading this, I hope this thesis makes you feel empowered. Empowered to not only study histories through different methods but to create histories in your own ways. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot so eloquently stated, “While some of us debate what history is or was, *others take it into their own hands.*”⁹

⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015, loc 67.; My emphasis added.

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