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Reflections on Being a Historian and Teaching History in the Midst of Historic Times

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Reflections on Being a Historian and Teaching History in the Midst of Historic Times

Cover Page Footnote

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Reflections on Being a Historian and Teaching History in the Midst of Historic Times

I first started thinking about historical evidence and COVID-19 when I saw a Nike ad in March that read: “If you ever dreamed of playing for millions around the world, now is your chance. Play inside, play for the world.” I can’t quite place my very first encounter with the ad; so much was unfolding so quickly, and I was spending more time than usual scrolling social media and news sites, trying to make sense of it all. It may have been when superstars such as Serena Williams shared the ad on Instagram that I first saw it (Gianatasio, 2020). Regardless of where I first encountered it, the ad lingered with me. Encouraging Americans to shelter in place, Nike created a clever slogan: Play inside, play for the world. This concept would make sense to no one outside this time, I thought. Given that I am a teacher of history, soon after that thought came another: this is such an incredible primary source. It is so much about *this* moment—*this* historical moment where Nike’s advocacy of sheltering in place is a rallying cry for responding to a global health emergency—and as such, would provide historians in the future a great window into our historic moment.

My mind continued to come back to the ad throughout Spring 2020. As weeks passed, I began thinking more about the nature of my discipline, the evidence that we seek *and* that we can actually find, and the stories we thus are able to tell of the past and the present. This one source made me think about all the sources that as historians use—those that are archived and those lost to us. In this short reflection, I’d like to explore some of my own thoughts in this moment, moving back and forth between my role as a historian and a social studies teacher educator. What can I bring to my own field and to my future research endeavors, and what do I pass along to my students, some planning to teach history and others who may only have a little background in the subject? In short, I’ve come to believe that sources such as this Nike ad help us think about how we document a historical moment and to talk through (with ourselves as well as our students) the complexity of what and how we know about the past.

What We Know to Ask about the Past: The Evidence We Gather (And Can’t Gather)

When we think of history of the twenty-first century, we sometimes lament the abundance of evidence—there is so much digital material!!—while simultaneously mourning the ephemeral nature of many modern sources. In modern times, we think particularly hard about email and social media. Is a handwritten diary better than a series of Facebook or Instagram posts? Maybe not, though we can debate the performative nature of diaries and public social media posts, weighing one against the other to gauge authentic insights into the past. As historians, we also look to things that can be saved. Social media is so much harder to archive, collect, and preserve than a diary donated to a historical society, but there is both so much of it and it feels so essential to documenting modern times.

Thinking about this moment, what then are the sources we gravitate towards to tell the public, personal, and local stories of COVID? Whose voices are we capturing and whose are we leaving behind? Does the abundance of digital sources help or hinder the sources we are able to preserve for historians to come? Are we prioritizing certain types of sources over others? And how we save the more contemporary sources that do not fit the mold of traditional preservation techniques? Zoom screenshots, snapchat posts, Tik-Tok videos, and memes are surely as much primary sources of our time as a “15 Days to Slow the Spread” website from the Center for Disease Control back in March, yet they are harder to preserve and catalog. Even the CDC website, a seemingly more permanent source, is impermanent (“15 Days to Slow the Spread,

2020). It can, and does, change daily. How do we track, cite, or capture the, for lack of a better word, essence of this as a primary source?

As a historian of American women and as someone who wants to uncover the experience of so-called ordinary Americans in history, I have long known and mourned how many stories of the past that will remain uncovered for lack of evidence. We historians are accustomed to thinking about evidence—and moreover, missing evidence and whose voices (whose truths) we are unable to access. Jill Lepore puts this beautifully in her biography of Jane Franklin, who would have been likely untraceable but for her connection to her famous brother Benjamin. “History is what is written and can be found,” Lepore wrote, adding, “what isn’t saved is lost, sunken and rotten, eaten by earth” (Lepore, 2014, p. 6). As historians, we try to tell the story of the past, but we are missing much of what happened in the past, making us unable to offer a full version of what has happened before us. Even what *is* archived is subjective, posing another set of limitations. (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998; Caswell, Migoni, Geraci, & Cifor, 2017; Cutrara, 2019; Douglas, 2018; Simon, 2014)

What will future historians thus miss about this moment, and can we use their coming dilemma in our classrooms in the here and now to talk about the past, to dig not just deeper but better as we talk with our students about historical thinking and its limitations? (Cutrara, 2019; Trouillot, 1995) In the early days of COVID-19, I felt almost dizzy looking at all the historical evidence around me, dizzy from the sheer quantity and quality as well as from the sense that so much would be lost to those in the future. Notably, none of the things I saw around me are those that students typically name when asked to generate a list of primary sources that a historian might use to research a given topic. Students gravitate to naming presidential speeches, diaries, letters, written accounts, even newspapers from a particular point in time. These are what they typically house under the broad label of “evidence,” and they are well equipped to discuss the limitations and biases of any of these. Diaries are particularly engaging, as students first think of them as the most honest accounts from the past (as there is no public to perform for) but then start thinking about how we perform for ourselves, even deceive ourselves. They are less equipped to name all the things we miss, nor to think critically about the subjectivity of the archives and the historical method, what Samantha Cutrara has called “the power or politics within history.” (Cutrara, 2019, p. 117) This moment allows us to talk to them more directly about what is being gathered, and the power and politics of the gathering.

Doing history during a global pandemic has offered a window into another of history’s subjectivities, that the “truths” we unearth about the past only come in answer to the questions we think and know to ask. If we were to list “evidence” on a classroom chalkboard—or let’s face it, in the chat box on Zoom—what would show up? They might start naming all the things we see: yard signs for graduating seniors, or students in plays cancelled; signs imploring one to wear a mask or to protest mask-wearing; Zoom screenshots of education disrupted and re-imagined; memes, gifs, and the whole world of social media. We can ask students to think about what items will be saved and which will be discarded. We can ask them to think about what and why that it and the power and privilege we have to make these decisions. This discussion can hopefully lead to an understanding that we will miss a lot of this as we gather evidence of the present for those who will write about it in the future. If we can see what we will be missing as we go about archiving this moment, can we imagine similar items and artifacts we have missed in the past—things now “sunken and rotten, eaten by earth”? And if so, what does that mean for the histories we are teaching and learning? For the histories we are gathering? There must be the means to seek out new, supposedly non-traditional sources of the past, or to find new ways to read

supposedly traditional evidence. This is the way, after all, that the voices of marginalized and ordinary peoples have been uncovered already (“Reading against the Grain, 2013).

Further, as we—citizens of this moment, subjects writing our own history—gather materials, we also might think about both how collection can be empowering as well as disempowering, to think long and deep about “subjectivity is bound into the creation” of our archives. (Cutrara, 2019, p. 118) Anna N. Dhody, curator at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, notes, the goal “is to assure people that you are preserving it for future understanding so that you get the whole picture and to not go back to the traditional way of archiving where you get only whatever the donor provides. Or what somebody has already scanned and sanitized.”

(“Precedents to Documenting COVID-19,” 2020, p. 697) Ricia Anne Chansky, a professor who built an optional memoir project with her students after they endured Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, notes that the project “was about re-empowering somebody who has been disempowered by disaster,” adding that in memoir writing, her students could “situate themselves as active agents with power,” the power to tell stories and to be trained in transcription, editing, and archiving. (“Precedents to Documenting COVID-19,” 2020, p. 698)

Watching a historic event unfold and thinking about how it is documented and will be documented in the future is thus humbling and challenging. But I believe it can help us talk with our students about the way we see and seek evidence of the past: the Nike Ad is projected, and a whole world of questions opens up. One question might center on where we place history. Are we in the humanities or social sciences? Is history art or science? This last is one I pose to students in historical research methods—and I challenge both answers. But thinking about the pandemic and evidence reveals many ways in which our work is subjective and that there are always new questions to ask, and hopefully new evidence to find. And in doing this, we might better understand how to think big and broadly about what constitutes evidence, now and as we think about the past. Though as historians, we may worry about accusations of presentism or about oversimplified linking of past and present, there is no doubt that we can use this moment to think about those voices left unearthed because their stories and artifacts were not collected in the past (Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2020).

Thinking about the Past and Documenting the Present: Archiving This Moment

As a historian and a social studies-teacher educator, I have tried to grasp the complexities of this moment as useful teaching tools for my students and future historians. At Eastern Illinois University, I also worked with our library to create an online repository for traditional sources such as diaries from these COVID-times but also sources such as the Nike ad as well as whatever sources stand out to the collectors as important relics of the present. Our collection is very small, but some students have continued gathering materials and others are undertaking oral histories with faculty, administration, staff, and students. Community members and alumni have also contributed to the archive, and a few of my alumni teaching in Illinois have also worked with their own students to contribute items. I was inspired towards building this collection when I saw my alma mater, Indiana University, collecting diaries from community members. As many places began to undertake similar collection projects, Arizona State University also launched what they titled “A Journal of the Plague Year,” calling on the ASU and broader community to act “not just as historians, but as chroniclers, recorders, memoirists, as image collectors,” asking for what future historians might need and naming evidence as not just text but “tweets, texts, Facebook posts, Instagram or Snapchat memes, and screenshots of the news and emails.” (Schwier and Knott, 2020; “A Journal of the Plague Year,” 2020).

While these early projects helped me think about the inception of the Documenting COVID-19 in Central Illinois archive, as the pandemic worsened and the protests over the murder of George Floyd became another moment of historic reckoning, my concerns about the ethics of working with students to collect evidence of a moment (or moments) of great trauma caused me to step back from some avenues of engaging in collection. As Eira Tansey has written, “There is something really unsettling about archivists, particularly those from institutions which don’t have a great track record of supporting their most marginalized workers or constituents, suggesting that the historical record should be a high priority while people are trying to keep their shit together and attempt to not die.” (2020) This is something I am still processing: in short, my thinking on archiving both past and present has a giant “to be continued...” after nearly every thought.

As we moved into the start of fall classes, I had this archive, students’ lived experiences, and all of my uncertainties about archival practices to draw upon to talk with incoming students—many aspiring teachers—about primary evidence and the nature of history. As I began my class this fall, I started with my opening lecture on what historians do and what primary documents are, getting to that typical discussion on sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and interpreting—all the good historical thinking work we teach students to do. But this year, I also showed the Nike ad that sparked so much thought, describing it as a modern primary document. I then showed them one of many posters my university has been using to encourage students to maintain social distance and stay home when sick. I used this source to model their first assignment, where I asked them to collect one artifact from this first week back at school and write a few sentences contextualizing and interpreting it – i.e., doing the work of historical thinking.

Centering the conversation on primary sources of this present moment is very different from how I would traditionally begin this course, and it may raise the eyebrows of some in my discipline. Not surprisingly, my students seemed to find these modern artifacts more accessible and understandable—that is, they aren’t struggling with older language and the heavy reading demands many primary documents make upon students—and they dove into the project. One student sheepishly emailed to make sure that a meme was “really” a primary document. “I tried to think outside the box,” she wrote, referencing the importance of meme culture today as a reason why she had thought to look for a meme. Another student submitted a photo of the library stacks roped off with caution tape, while yet another submitted a photo of incoming freshman at an outdoor movie instead of the usual welcome back events. Other students submitted a sign (or a photo of a sign) about an outdoor church service, a notice about free on-campus COVID-19 testing, and a photo showing that indoor dining was closed at the local McDonald’s. One student took the assignment a step further, submitting a photo of a rally in our state in May against stay-at-home orders, using this source to highlight the ways in which our return to campus was politicized. Another student tied her artifact to her personal experience of working retail, submitting a sign that stated “No shirt, no shoes, no mask, no service,” which she described in her assignment as a “quote we never even imagined of hearing before March of 2020!”

I was amazed at what students brought in and it was clear that they learned something from this activity. This is a class of students who, for the most part, are not history majors but rather are elementary and middle level education majors. For many, this will be the only history course they take at the university, and it was vital to me that they really think about history not as something to learn and regurgitate to their future fifth grade or first grade students but that they

encounter it as a disciplinary way of thinking and knowing. Talking about the history being made around them offered a window in, one that we could then build upon all semester.

In short, what started as me looking around our new world, dizzy with wonder at all the primary evidence appearing (even disappearing) before our eyes became a way to re-imagine both my teaching and my thinking about the work I do to research and tell stories about the past. The Nike ad's directive to "Play inside, play for the world" was projected to my (online) classroom, and a host of questions emerged, for students as well as for me. The questions feel as important, at present, as the answers I speculate upon here. I leave this essay with more questions than answers, but I am along for the continued, albeit dizzying, ride.

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