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Common Core, Informational Texts, and the Historical (Mis)Representations of Native Americans within Trade Books

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Native Americans\(^1\) are frequently included within elementary school history curriculum. Trade books are a staple for elementary teachers. Educators should be cognizant of how the literature they select historically represents Native Americans and their culture, religion, and historical interactions with European explorers, colonists, and eventually Americans. Blogs, like *American Indians in Children’s Literature*, and books, like *Child Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*, provide illustrative examples of trade books’ misrepresentation. No scholarship, however, has empirically evaluated how Native Americans are historically represented in currently available trade books.

As Sara Schwebel (2011) has convincingly demonstrated, companies that publish children’s books are businesses. Their job is to sell books; they do not always ensure the historicity, or historical accuracy, of the books they sell. In order to sell more books, publishing companies may potentially compromise historicity in order to avoid controversial topics. Such ahistoricity could (potentially) emerge in books about Native Americans that narrow their focuses to only include information about their culture, religion, or folktales and give little reference to the historical path they took from controlling North America to being isolated and marginalized. Ahistoricity could also appear if the author disregarded or significantly minimized mention of violence. Historical misrepresentation can take many forms, as various scholars have convincingly demonstrated (Chick, 2006; King, Davis, & Brown, 2012; Loewen, 1995; Matusevich, 2006). *Heroification* and *villainification* appear when one person (or group) and is given entirely more credit or blame for changing history than is realistically deserved. Heroification and villainification were noted in children’s literature that portrayed Christopher Columbus as either a near-deity or evil incarnate (Bickford, 2013a). *Exceptionalism* emerges when an extraordinary historical figure is portrayed as typical. While certainly worthy of celebration, Harriet Tubman’s life experiences do not illustrate that of a typical slave; exceptionalism was common in slavery-based children’s literature (Bickford & Rich, 2014a; Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009). *Omission* surfaces when important information is excluded from a historical account. Many children’s authors omitted Helen Keller’s accomplishments after age eight (Bickford & Rich, 2014b). Trade books are potentially replete with historical misrepresentations.

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\(^1\) Tensions emerge when a single term is used to denote the various and distinct peoples living in North and South America prior to contact with European explorers (Mann, 2005, 2011). While a single name cannot signify these diverse groups, we use the term *Native Americans* when referencing the general populations and specific names of tribes when appropriate.
Generalizations about trade books’ historical misrepresentations, however, cannot be made for many reasons. First, historical misrepresentations inconsistently materialize. Literature intended for younger audiences is invariably less complex but not necessarily more historically misrepresentative. Some of the most historically representative books about slavery were intended for elementary students while some of the most misrepresentative were intended for middle level readers (Bickford & Rich, 2014a; Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009). Second, the emergence of historical misrepresentations is seemingly dependent to the historical topic within the children’s literature. In a study on literature intended for elementary students, trade books about Eleanor Roosevelt largely achieved historicity while literature about Rosa Parks and Helen Keller were comparatively ahistorical (Bickford & Rich, 2014b). Finally, there is a dearth of empirical research about elementary-level history-based children’s literature, especially about Native Americans. Scholars have examined children’s trade books about Columbus’s interactions with Native Americans (Bickford, 2013a; Bigelow, 1998a, 1998b; Henning, Snow-Gerono, Reed, & Warner, 2006; Peterson, 1998) and traced the historical patterns of Native American representation within children’s literature over the past two centuries (Schwebel, 2011) yet no empirical research exists about the content within Native American-based trade books currently available for teachers.

Our research fills this gap made wider now that nearly all states, including Illinois, have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010). Beginning in lower elementary school, the rigorous literacy expectations increase the use of informational texts across content areas. CCSS (2010) stresses the importance of using multiple informational texts for students to evaluate diverse perspectives, scrutinize authorial bias, and weigh evidence. In short, it guides elementary students to begin to read (and evaluate) history like historians. To do so, teachers must use both primary and secondary informational texts. Trade books represent the secondary informational texts. In subsequent sections, we detail how we examined the trade books’ patterns of historical representation and misrepresentation and report the findings. We then provide primary sources as ancillaries for elementary classrooms, considering both the trade books’ historical misrepresentation and the young students’ reading abilities.

Methods

We used statistical sampling theory to establish a representative data pool and inductive content analysis, a rigorous qualitative approach, to guide our evaluation (Kline, 2008; Krippendorff, 2013; Maxwell, 2010). To generate a complete and current data pool, we used reliable, popular search engines to collect titles of Native American-based children’s trade books published in the last quarter century. To ensure the data pool embodied elementary-based literature, we jettisoned all titles with reading levels outside 1.0 – 5.0. To create a representative convenience sample, we randomly selected 15 titles (see Appendix I).

Once the sample was created, we read all books and recorded observable patterns and anomalies. We discussed our initial observations and noted potential areas of historical representation and

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misrepresentation. Our discussion guided the development of our research instrument (see Appendix II). We then re-read each book individually, evaluated it according to the research instrument, and discussed tentative findings. We collaboratively compiled results to determine the frequency of emergent patterns of historical representation and misrepresentation. This research conforms to best practice qualitative content analysis research methodology (Kline, 2008, Krippendorff, 2013; Maxwell, 2010) and mirrors similar studies on children’s literature (Bickford, 2013a; Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b).

Findings

We identified several patterns. Some appear predictable, like book characteristics such as intended audience and genre. Others were unexpected, like the specific patterns of historical misrepresentation. We report in the following subsections only those findings that are statistically significant and relevant for elementary educators.

Intended Audience

The majority of books (n = 9; 60%) had intended audiences of upper elementary students in grades three through five. The remainder (n = 6; 40%) aimed at an early elementary audience. A distinct, but not overwhelming, majority targeted older students, which seems predictable considering the background knowledge needed for a reader to grasp distant historical events. This finding, while foreseeable, also indicates that teachers of all elementary grades can locate literature for their classroom. Educators should cautiously consider more than simply the trade books’ prose, syntax, and vocabulary as subsequent findings reveal uneven historicity.

Genre

Knowing the intended historical topic, the genre of the majority of books was not surprising. A simple majority of the books (n = 8; 53%) were narrative non-fiction. A small percentage (n = 3; 20%) was historical fiction. Interestingly, a noteworthy portion (n = 4; 27%) was of an unexpected genre: folktales, myths, and legends. Two were singularly so (Goble, 1998; Oughton, 1992) and two others were of mixed genre. Of the latter, one blended folktale with historical fiction (Bruhac, 2000b) and another combined folktale with narrative non-fiction (Lorenz & Schleh, 2004). Surprisingly, not a single book was distinctly expository.

This finding, like the previous subsection, was foreseeable and important for elementary teachers. It is significant for teachers of history/social studies and English/reading because CCSS (2010) prescribes students read both literature, or fiction, and informational texts, either primary or secondary historical sources. While a variety of genres are represented in the reviewed trade books, elementary teachers might consider looking elsewhere to meet the multi-genre requirement for two reasons. First, buying two class sets of trade books is twice as expensive as purchasing a
single class set. Second, a resourceful teacher can locate and incorporate rich informational texts (primary sources) to supplement both secondary texts (non-fiction) and literature (fiction).

Main Character and Demography

We scrutinized the number of main characters in each book and their gender, ethnicity, and tribal affiliations, which generated data about the included (and excluded) perspectives. Elementary level history-based children’s books trend towards a single character or perspective (Williams, 2009). Some have argued this is to enable young readers to identify with the main character (Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009), yet exceptionalism and heroification—two historical misrepresentations—are often the result (Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b). We speculated the reviewed trade books would largely have a single main character. As most books depicting contact between Native Americans and Columbus centered on the perspective of European explorers (Bickford, 2013a), we hypothesized most books would concentrate on white colonists or explorers. Two noteworthy patterns of demography emerged; only one cohered with our hypotheses.

First, the vast majority of books (n = 13; 87%) had a single main character. No books had two or more main characters. Of the two books (13%) that had no main characters, neither centered on a single historical person but instead focused on cultural aspects endemic to Native America (Bruhac, 2002; Ashrose, 1993). Our finding about a single main character cohered with previous research (Bickford, 2013a; Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b; Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009).

Second, every book (n = 15; 100%) focused entirely on the perspective of Native Americans. Not a single book centered on Pilgrims, colonists, explorers from Europe, or settlers arriving from the emerging United States. This finding was quite different from the children’s books about 1492 and Columbus’s interactions with Native Americans, which had a majority—but not all—of the books written from the European perspective (Bickford, 2013a).

Combined, these findings are significant for elementary teachers. As CCSS (2010) encourages elementary teachers to incorporate multiple perspectives of an event, no single trade book could independently fulfill this requirement. Outside resources are needed. These outside resources should consider perspectives from colonists, settlers, or other non-Indians and their interactions.

Historical Implications of Contact

Jared Diamond has examined, on a worldwide scale, how certain societies have emerged to conquer others (Diamond, 1999) while others have contracted, collapsed, or are at risk for disintegration (Diamond, 2011). Within the Americas, Charles Mann has explored what native societies looked like prior to Columbus (2005) and in the years and centuries after the initiation of the Colombian Exchange (2011). Scholars such as Diamond (1999, 2011) and Mann (2005, 2011) have detailed the violent conflicts that frequently emerged and the subsequent starvation, disease,
and demise of native peoples. Scholars cannot historicize Native Americans without detailing the period between first contact and the completion of Manifest Destiny.

Children’s authors cannot integrate every aspect of this period considering its length, its (potentially) graphic nature, and the tender age of the readers. We hypothesized trade books might incorporate historically accurate yet age-appropriate details of the first contact, conflict, language barriers (that contributed to misunderstanding), starvation, disease, the historical path Europeans chose, and the historical path Native Americans were forced to take. The vast majority of books either disregarded every element \( n = 9; 60\% \) or included just one or two significant aspects \( n = 6; 40\% \); only two \( (13\%) \) books include three or more aspects. By omitting or significantly minimizing the historical reverberations of contact, the trade books misrepresented this oft-taught aspect of history. While elementary teachers do not intend to misrepresent history, misplaced trust in the selected trade books can lead teachers to do so inadvertently. (We offer ways for educators to overcome such omission below.)

**Culture, Tradition, Religion, and Livelihood**

Considering the lack of details provided about contact with European settlers and colonists within the children’s literature, the abundance of details about Native Americans’ lives and livelihoods was surprising. We examined the children’s books to see what was mentioned about traditions, customs, religion, diverse rights of passage, and obtaining food through farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering. Each of these topics could be incorporated in age-appropriate, historically representative ways. Three authors \( (20\%) \) mentioned them all (Ashrose, 1993; Lorenz & Schleh, 2002; Ortiz, 2004). Nearly three-quarters of the books \( n = 11; 73\% \) mentioned two or more aspects of culture and livelihood. A minority of books \( n = 4; 27\% \) incorporated only one aspect. In contrast to the considerable omission about the historical implications of contact, the reviewed children’s trade books significantly integrated various aspects of culture, tradition, religion, and livelihood into their narratives. This finding informs teachers’ understandings about where curricular supplementation is not needed.

**Themes of Historical Misrepresentation**

As mentioned in the introduction, there are many themes of historical misrepresentation. Omission, exceptionalism, heroification, and villainification (and others) emerge in different ways in children’s literature and appear to be contextually contingent to the books’ historical focus (Bickford & Rich, 2014b). Considering the relevant overlap in historical time frame, historical groups, and intended audience of the literature, it is important to note that multiple historical representations consistently emerged in children’s trade books about Columbus (Bickford, 2013a) and slavery (Bickford & Rich, 2014a; Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009) but not in Native American-based trade books. Omission was present in all of the children’s books about Native Americans yet it was the only historical misrepresentation considered to be ubiquitous. Omission centered on the conflicts and violence surrounding European-Native American contact. It is
positive and surprising that omission was the only prevalent historical misrepresentation as
exceptionalism, heroification, and villainization emerged sporadically and without a discernible
pattern.

Omission, however, should not be taken lightly. Since only the perspective of the Native Americans was included and because the majority of books disregarded the violence associated with contact with settlers and colonists, a young reader would likely not grasp two important elements of this historical era. First, a young reader would not likely see Native Americans as the victims of aggression who were literally marginalized. Second, a young reader would not likely view European settlers and colonists as the aggressors and perpetrators of violence. A similarly egregious misrepresentation would be if children learned only of Rosa Parks’s refusal to cede her bus seat and nothing of the subsequent violence, threats of violence, and job dismissal. White Americans initiated and (at times violently) maintained a segregated society. White America’s reactionary response to desegregation is as integral to the story of the Civil Rights Movement as black America’s revolutionary acts. Regrettably, the bully/victim dynamic is overlooked when the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans—and the historical implications of these interactions—are omitted. The trade books presented Native Americans as a distant relic of a bygone era or as a modern anomaly without a past. In fact, only one book connected Native Americans’ historical past with their contemporary presence (Ashrose, 1993).

Elementary educators can overcome this ahistoricity while attending to the rigorous standards of state and national initiatives. They need only discipline-specific tasks and age-appropriate texts. The subsequent section provides an illustrative guide.

**Primary Materials and Practical Suggestions**

Beginning early in elementary school, CCSS (2010) expects teachers to integrate numerous informational texts from multiple, divergent perspectives for young students to examine and scrutinize. In doing so, elementary students begin to read (and evaluate) history like historians using age-appropriate primary and secondary texts. The children’s books that we examined are age-appropriate secondary informational texts. Primary texts—like letters, diary entries, and other first hand accounts—are neither common in elementary school nor digestible for young students in their original form. Primary sources are, however, necessary for historical thinking, an integral element of state and national initiatives. Primary sources can also be modified for readability, as scholars encourage (Wineburg & Martin, 2009). Primary texts are necessary and can be made palatable for elementary students. The following ancillaries are intended for elementary classrooms. This is an illustrative, not exhaustive, collection of primary source material. Young learners will find the classroom activities engaging; teachers will note explicit connections to CCSS (2010).

Cara Ashrose distinguished herself as the only children’s author to purposefully bridge Native Americans’ historical past to their contemporary presence. If *The Very First Americans* (Ashrose,
1993) were used as a whole class novel, students would have a far more complex understanding of various cultural and tribal aspects. Motivated teachers, though, can enhance and complicate students’ thinking by introducing different texts that elicit attention and pique curiosities. Totem poles and folk tales, two areas of emphasis in Ashrose’s (1993) book, are fertile with potential.

Many museums, universities, and private organizations provide rich images and descriptions of the encoded symbols and their meaning. The Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture and the University of British Columbia’s Indigenous Foundations are two online exhibits generated by reliable organizations. Gulli: Totem Poles and Carvings and Totem Poles from the Tlingit and Haida Tribes are no less extensive in their online offerings but their private ownership raises questions of authenticity. The Library of Congress, for instance, has an extensive gallery that includes images like Figure One.

Figure 1. Native Americans holding up their hands toward totem pole. Chicago Daily News, Inc., photographer. Published 1929. Summary: Image of a group of Native American adults and children wearing traditional Native American clothing and headdresses standing next to a totem pole on a field in Chicago, Illinois, holding up their hands toward totem pole. A crowd is standing in the background. Notes: This photonegative taken by a Chicago Daily News photographer may have been published in the newspaper. Cite as: DN-0088619, Chicago Daily News negatives collection, Chicago History Museum.
To incorporate such material, a resourceful teacher could first have students write observations and inferences about the images. Such writing, and the subsequent discussions, could develop into a categorical list of observed animals/caricatures along with speculations about their intended meaning. The inferences could then be checked (and corrected) using the aforementioned web-based resources and Ashrose’s (1993) *The Very First Americans*. For instructional scaffolding, we envision asking students to engage in KTQ (What do you Know? What do you Think? What Questions do you have?). Young children find short queries to be manageable; teachers find the procedure to focus students’ attention to oft-neglected minutiae. The teacher could then provide students with a dozen images, the printed names of the animals/caricatures observable within the images, and descriptions of said animals/caricatures. She could then ask students to match the image with the appropriate name and description. Young learners would attempt to solve the puzzle by manipulating the many possible outcomes. By participating in such steps, young children engage in structured inquiry (RI.G3.1), determine main ideas of various texts (RI.G3.2), and better grasp domain-specific words and phrases (RI.G3.4) as they make connections between images and the book (RI.G3.7; RI.G3.8; RI.G3.9).

Teachers can also complicate students’ thinking about culture using text-based informational texts. After reading the class book, the teacher could include unabridged folktales that are similar in spirit to, but distinctly different from, those included within Ashrose’s (1993) book. *First People*, a website generated by an amalgamation of various North America tribal entities, and *The Library of Congress* each offer innumerable folktales and folklore. As good teachers already do, the teacher will likely match specific folktales to individual students based on the folktales’ reading difficulty and the students’ reading level. Students then read the folktale in its abridged format, decode the language from its centuries-past original form to a more contemporary prose, and add twists and changes where appropriate. In a Think/Pair/Share format, as is common in elementary school, students can peer edit to give and receive feedback before making modifications. If an extension is needed for early finishers, students can illustrate their story with drawings that represent different twists and turns. In a large class discussion format, the teacher can guide students as they make connections to Ashrose’s (1993) *The Very First Americans*. In doing so, students write these imagined experiences using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences (W.G3.3); they obtain guidance from adults and support from peers as they develop and organize their writing (W.G3.4; W.G3.5; W.G3.6).

These classroom activities provide guidance for teachers interested in extending students’ understandings beyond the employed class novel. Consistent with state and national initiatives, these methods and assessments challenge students with cognitive tasks that are age-appropriate and discipline-specific. Whereas the above resources and activities direct students towards cultural aspects of Native Americans, the most common historical misrepresentation reported above centered on historical omissions. Primary source material is needed to address this gap.

Document-based questions (DBQ) include both a question (or series of interrelated questions) and a collection of primary sources that center on a historical event, era, or person (Wineburg, Martin,
DBQs are discipline-specific assessments that challenge students to think historically (VanSledright, 2014; Wineburg, 2001). Younger students—with proper scaffolding and age-appropriate content—can also engage in historical thinking, or what has been termed “shadows of historical thinking” (Bickford, 2013b, p. 61). Digital archives, like The Library of Congress: American Memory and Smithsonian Source: Resources for Teaching American History, provide teachers with innumerable primary source material and are free for classroom use. Teachers can create a customized DBQ by selecting rich primary documents and modifying the length, prose, and syntax of text-based resources (Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b; Wineburg & Martin, 2009). For an illustrative model of a DBQ modified for implementation in elementary grades, we offer Historicizing Native Americans’ Interactions with Non-Natives (Appendix III). For practical methods that elicit specific elements of historical thinking, teachers should reference various methodological guides intended for young children (Bickford, 2013b) and adolescents (Loewen, 2010; Nokes, 2011; Wineburg et al., 2011).

Discussion

Our findings contribute to the history education in elementary classrooms. Whereas the previous decade had seen a reduction in history content within elementary schools (Fallace et al., 2007; Holloway & Chiodo, 2009; Wilton & Bickford, 2012), CCSS (2010) increases students’ readings of informational texts and employment of historical thinking. Teachers often rely on textbooks and children’s trade books to incorporate history into their curriculum yet are likely unaware of the ubiquity of historical misrepresentations (Loewen, 1995; Schwebel, 2011; Wilton & Bickford, 2012). While there have been no less than a dozen studies in the last two decades on historical misrepresentations within textbooks (e.g. Chick, 2006; Clark et al., 2004; Fitzgerald, 2009; Lin et al., 2009; Lindquist, 2009; Loewen, 1995; Matusевич, 2006), children’s trade books have largely remained unexamined. Our findings expand the field of history education.

Our research also supports elementary teachers. We identified important areas of both historical misrepresentation and historicity within children’s literature. We demonstrated how to locate, modify, and implement age-appropriate and truncated primary source material. To foster young students’ achievement of the cognitive tasks associated with state and national initiatives, we offered strategies to supplement the resources.

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**Appendix I – Data Pool**


### Appendix II – Research Instrument for Native American-Based Literature

1. Author’s name, publication date, title, company.
2. For (about) what age/grade was this book intended?
   - a. Primary (k-2)
   - b. Intermediate (3-5)
3. What is the book’s genre?
   - a. Literature (historical fiction)
   - b. Informational Text (narrative non-fiction, expository, biography)
4. Who were the main characters? Describe the main characters.
   - a. Name
   - b. Age
   - c. Gender
   - d. Ethnicity/race/religious/tribe/occupation/role affiliation (European, Settler, American, Colonists, Explorers, Pilgrims, Puritans; North American, Indian, Native American, Wampanoag, or Pokanoket)
   - e. Was this person important enough to be given a speaking line?
5. What historical events/issues were mentioned? Describe in detail.
   - a. First meeting
   - b. Conflict
   - c. Language barriers
   - d. Starvation
   - e. Disease
   - f. The historical path the European settlers would take
   - g. The historical path the native cultures would take
6. What about the Native American cultures were mentioned:
   - a. Animals
   - b. Farming
   - c. Hunting and gathering
   - d. Traditions/customs
   - e. Rights of passage
   - f. Religion
7. Which, if any, common historical misrepresentations emerged?
   - a. Omission
   - b. Exceptionalism
   - c. Heroification
   - d. Villainification
8. How did the narrative end?
9. Were any primary sources incorporated? If yes, in the foreword, narrative, afterward?
10. Were there any parts of the book historically inaccurate or implausible?
Appendix III – Historicizing Native Americans’ Interactions with Non-Natives

“Why will you take [with] force what you [can get with] love? Why will you destroy us [when we] supply you with food? What [good is] war? ... We [do not have guns], and willing to give you what you ask, if you come in a friendly manner. ... [I] know it is better to eat good meat, sleep comfortably, live quietly with my women and children, laugh and be merry with [you], and being [your] friend, trade for [your] copper and hatchets, than to run away...”

*Document 1.* Speech by Powhatan, as recorded by John Smith [http://www.smithsoniansource.org](http://www.smithsoniansource.org)

“This since you are ... strangers and come into our [country], you should [follow] the customs of our country [and not] impose yours upon us.”

*Document 2.* A wicomesse Indian to governor of Maryland, 1633

[http://www.smithsoniansource.org](http://www.smithsoniansource.org)

“Colonies [fall apart] when the colonists [copy] the habits, customs, and practices of the natives. There is no better way to [fix] this evil than to do away with and destroy completely the habits and practices of the natives.”

*Document 3.* Virginia colony promoter Sir William Herbert, 1610.

[http://www.smithsoniansource.org](http://www.smithsoniansource.org)

*Document 4.* The Deerfield Massacre of 1704, in which Indians and French allies attacked and burned the settlement. [http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/](http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/)
“Colonel Chivington did, on the morning of the 29th of November, surprise attack ... [a] camp of friendly Indians and [killed] a large number of them, [mostly women and children,] and [allowed his] troops [to do so] the most horrible [way].”


“A long time ago this land belonged to our fathers; but when I go up to the river I see camps of soldiers here on its bank. These soldiers cut down my timber; they kill my buffalo; and when I see that, my heart feels like bursting; I feel sorry.”


"I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed... He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are—perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

Document 7. Indian Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, upon his surrender to the U.S. government troops, September 1877.

“If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian...we can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike... give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. You might as well expect the rivers to run backward [if you expect] any man who is born a free man [to be] satisfied when penned up and denied [freedom] to go where he pleases. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. Let me be a free man... free to travel... free to stop...free to work...free to choose my own teachers... free to follow the religion of my Fathers... free to think and talk and act for myself.”

Document 9. “Promise of the High Plains,” ca. 1880s in The Railroaders. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division (Call # Portfolio 20, Folder 16)