

Telling Tales Takes Tall Tolls: Analyzing the Role of Narrative in Historical Documentation

Our mission in ANTH 410: Latino Roots is to “broaden the historical narrative of the state of Oregon through studying, theorizing, and documenting the depth and breadth of Latino and Latin American immigration, settlement, social movements, and civic and political integration in Oregon during the 20th century.”¹ While our mission is necessary, it is not enough to collect new stories or historical perspectives that fall within the cultural and historical context of our study. It is worth analyzing the mediums we intend to use to collect, cut and distribute new historical perspectives to insure we are not augmenting current historical narratives. To do this we must understand the origins of current historical narratives, how translation/transcoding affect historical narratives, and how we as documentarians can develop comprehensive documentation methodologies.

Eurocentric, self-centered political ideology justified the colonization and genocide that founded the 13 original British colonies, and traditional rules of domination dictated Anglo-European interaction with non-whites.² Paul Pickard said of early American history,

“From very early in the history of the republic, Euro-Americans asked themselves, ‘What shall be the geographical limits of our nation?’ but their underlying meaning was, ‘Where shall we go and what shall we take?’”³

To systematically control the land mass and native peoples, affluent Anglo-Europeans established a social hierarchy that endowed social and culture capital to those with white skin.

¹ Latino Roots class syllabus.

² Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. The Border Crossed Us; Euro-Americans Take the Continent, 1830-1900, pp. 129-170. (pg. 132)

³ Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. Chapter 2, Colliding Peoples in Eastern North America, 1800-1780, pp. 29-40. (pg. 30)

“Empire making is race making... dominators used race to mark those they dominated, and then congratulated themselves for being racially superior.”⁴ Race is a concept constructed by a domineering group; during the colonization of America, Anglo-Europeans created notions of power in terms of race. “The word in the beginning seems to have been spoken to the white man, when he was commanded to ‘subdue the earth and have dominion over it,’” was one white man’s opinion, “The coming of the white man ... means government, enterprise, agriculture, commerce, churches, schools, law and order. It will be better for the colored man to have the white man rule.”⁵ The Anglo-Europeans codified white supremacy into the social and government infrastructure to elevate their perceived social, cultural and biological superiority. To this end, Whites actively worked to extinguish other cultural voices in their newly conquered empire; cultural coexistence was not enough, “Native people’s extinction, for many Whites ... was an affirmation of White superiority, and it paved the way for Whites to appropriate Indian identities and symbols for their own, and thereby to naturalize themselves in the American landscape.”⁶ Historical narratives in Oregon reflect this attitude; Anglo-Oregonians worked alongside their fellow Anglo-Americans to segregate and disempower the Native American presence in the state. While researchers and other government agencies did collect and preserve information relating to Indian culture and history, “In scientific practice, scientists operate under theoretical notions of how the world operates, and many of these notions...placed Indians in an ‘uncivilized’ and thus

⁴Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. The Border Crossed Us; Euro-Americans Take the Continent, 1830-1900, pp. 129-170. (pg. 132)

⁵ Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. The Border Crossed Us; Euro-Americans Take the Continent, 1830-1900, pp. 129-170. (pg. 133)

⁶ Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity*. The Border Crossed Us; Euro-Americans Take the Continent, 1830-1900, pp. 129-170. (Pg. 141)

inferior status. These biases tended to color their field research and subsequent findings.”⁷ This methodology of establishing historical narratives in Oregon is also applied to other non-white groups as well; specifically, to migrant Latin American workers.

Migrant Latinos have long served Oregon businesses in times of labor shortfalls, but work environments afforded to these workers have “been characterized by harsh working conditions, enormous amounts of physical labor, and minimal remuneration.”⁸ Historical narratives collected in the state have neglected to record the experiences of the approximately 47,000 bracero agricultural labors contracted to work in Oregon from Mexico between 1943 and 1947.⁹ These workers have also been traditionally discriminated against and resented by the Anglo communities they work for. Johanna Ogden researched the history of bracero immigrant workers in Hood River, and discovered the communities’s attitude towards migrant workers as one of only temporary acceptance:

“The lack of community inclusion of Mexican braceros by the extant community of Hood River could be viewed simply as the result of the dictates of agricultural economics and a basic public acceptance of the federal contractual guarantee that these laborers would be only temporary additions to the region. But in reality the treatment of and attitude toward the Mexican bracero laborers was deeply shaped by the rooted in Hood River’s history and attitudes toward race, citizenship, and

⁷ Coquille Tribe of Indians. *Changing Landscapes: Sustaining Traditions: Proceedings of the 5th and 6th Annual Coquille Cultural Preservation Conferences*. Coquille Indian Tribe, 2002. Print. (Pg. 54)

⁸ Gilbert Paul Carrasco, "Latinos in the United States: Invitation and Exile. In *Immigrants Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, edited by Juan F. Perea, pp. 190-204. New York: New York University Press. 1997. (Pg. 190)

⁹ Erasmo Gamboa. “Braceros in the Pacific Northwest: Laborers on the Domestic Front, 1942-1947.” *Pacific Historical Review* 56 (93):378-398. (August, 1986). (Pg. 137)

landownership. ...these Mexicans were not to become permanent, landowning members of the community. The invitation was to work, but it straightforwardly was not an open-ended invitation to stay.”¹⁰

Anglo-exclusivity established a justification for discriminating against non-white peoples, and contemporary Anglo-American society persists in the pressuring of non-anglican groups to acclimate to Anglo-culture. Workers not proficient in speaking English struggle “to understand their labor rights, receive safety training, and obtain legal and health care services”—services Anglo-Americans expect.¹¹ Anti-immigration ideologies are deeply rooted in American historical narratives, in large part because “[the] negation of indigenous views of history was a critical part of asserting colonial ideology.”¹² As such, the colonial ideology held by affluent Anglo-historians, -government workers, and others affected whose stories were packaged within the context of American history and how they were remembered.

As we attempt to diversify the historical narrative within Oregon by documenting different peoples and different perspectives, how we tell these stories must be deeply analyzed as well. We may have an understanding about how Anglo-culture has dictated the faces and voices of history to this point in time, but if we are to move forward in the diversification process we must be careful in making sure echos of the past are not unintentionally grafted to these new

¹⁰ Johanna Ogden. “Race, Labor, and Getting Out the Harvest: The Bracero Program in World War II Hood River, Oregon.” In *Memory, Community, and Activism: Mexican Migration and Labor in the Pacific Northwest*, Jerry Garcia and Gilberto Garcia, eds., pp. 129-152. East Lansing: Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University Press, 2005.

¹¹ *Gender, Families, and Latino Immigration in Oregon*. 2008. Edited by Marcela Mendoza and Lynn Stephen. Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon. (Pg. 6)

¹² Coquille Tribe of Indians. *Changing Landscapes: Sustaining Traditions: Proceedings of the 5th and 6th Annual Coquille Cultural Preservation Conferences*. Coquille Indian Tribe, 2002. Print. (Pg. 65)

historical documents. Carlos S. Maldonado noted that, “Testimonio represents an excellent tool for conducting oral and life history work to expand Chicano historiography,” and various forms of media have practiced this for decades; interviews have long been critical components to journalistic storytelling and documentary work. But he writes this in English; he is speaking to an Anglicized audience. Anglo-Europeans adopted English as an unofficial medium for official communication as part of its exclusive practices; non-whites were originally not considered “American” citizens, and so the distribution of official documents in other languages seemed moot.¹³ If we are to expand Latino/Chicano historiography, doing so in English might unintentionally graft an aspect of Anglican identity to that historical narrative.

When languages are translated into other languages, information is lost or rearranged; it can lose an authenticity to its identity. Thus, documenting Latino/Chicano historical narratives in English presents a potential problem; Latinos/Chicanos did not preserve their history within the context of English. So, to document these narratives in English precludes these narratives to suffer some form of loss in the form of detail, accuracy, and/or perspective. As with any language, nuances expressed in one language do not translate easily to another; other verbal expressions, modes of story telling, and indigenous oral practices cannot fully translate to English without some compression or simplification. Further transcoding of oral narratives onto film increases the likelihood of information being rearranged, lost or reworded.¹⁴ Film was created by Anglo-Europeans and Anglo-Americans; the modes of narrative evolved at the hands of these same people largely because of the Anglo-influence dominant in modes of production

¹³ Pickard, Paul. *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity. The Border Crossed Us; Euro-Americans Take the Continent, 1830-1900*, pp. 129-170. (pg. 148)

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, London; Blackwell, 2001, 166-176.

and distribution. With every cut, every edit, an editor expresses an opinion of what he/she thinks is important; the editor is tasked with dominating the narrative. As documentarians, allowing ourselves to be directed by anglicized ideas of storytelling risks Latino/Chicano stories losing authentic narrative, aesthetic presentation, etc. If our perspectives are invariably removed from the history—I am an Anglo-American planning to document a piece of local Chicano history—we cannot objectively approach the process of editing. The Anglo-culture that dominates popular media has already trained me to accept certain visual and narrative aesthetics; these exclusive ideas have trained me judge information as interesting/pretty/important/etc. If Latinos/Latinas stories are to diversify already established narratives they must command their own stories. That is to say, as an Anglo-American I can only provide a mouthpiece for the member of the Latino/Latina community; he/she must establish the visual and narrative aesthetics. This establishment is as important now as the initial establishment of labor unions in Oregon was.

When labor unions in Oregon were in their infancy, they had considerable support from non-migrant influences; The Valley Migrant League (VML) stands out in this regard, as it was founded and supported by a handful of Anglo-Americans, in addition to Chicano community members. Similar to our goal, part of the VML mission was to provide migrant communities a voice against substandard working conditions and living environments, but it was a much more than a labor union.¹⁵ The VML was a socio-political movement that intended to educate migrant workers of their rights (or rights they deserved), while also providing support for Chicano communities in the forms of services such as summer school programs, day care/nursery centers,

¹⁵ Erlinda Gonzales-Berry with Dwaine Plaza. “‘We are tired of cookies and old clothes:’ From Poverty Program to Community Empowerment among Oregon’s Mexicano Population, 1957-1975.” In *Seeing Color: Indigenous Peoples and Racialized Ethnic Minorities in Oregon*, Jun Xing et.al (eds.), pp. 92-113. University Press of America, 2007. (Pg. 100)

and adult education programs. In its initial years, the director of the organization was an Anglo-American by the name of John Little; he wanted to change the institutions through which migrant workers were unable to organize, but he only accepted the position “until we can find somebody who can survive in Washington D.C. and who is from the raza [mexicano people], preferably an ex-migrant worker.”¹⁶ Little recognized that a proactive labor movement needs to be produced and managed by the people closest to its effects. The inclusion of migrant worker Frank Martinez would eventually lead to VML hiring an entirely Chicano staff, and ultimately to the establishment of a strong, fighting union that would empower Chicano communities.

If we are to similarly help migrant communities establish historical narratives in the greater public sphere, a methodology that relinquishes control over visual and narrative aesthetics will help empower these communities in the preservation of their histories. Contemporary, anglicized styles of storytelling lack a cultural depth that embraces a diversity of aesthetic difference. To appropriately account for a kind of cross-cultural contamination that may occur over the documentation of these narratives, we as documentarians will be forced to consider our own egos in the documentation process; deciphering between what the subject thinks is important, and stories we recognize as having endearing qualities. As historical documents our narratives can fulfill one of two different purposes: the historical narrative is intentionally anglicized to provide anglicized communities with comprehensible counter-points in history; or, our historical narrative can break away from anglicized modes of storytelling and depict a uniquely indigenous narrative.

¹⁶ Erlinda Gonzales-Berry with Dwaine Plaza. “‘We are tired of cookies and old clothes:’ From Poverty Program to Community Empowerment among Oregon’s Mexicano Population, 1957-1975.” In *Seeing Color: Indigenous Peoples and Racialized Ethnic Minorities in Oregon*, Jun Xing et.al (eds.), pp. 92-113. University Press of America, 2007. (Pg. 102)