"A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past"
Webinar Transcript

Interpretive Theme: Historical Process

Webinar Title: Historical Process

Scholar: Dr. Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, University of Central Florida, Department of Anthropology

Webinar Transcript:

Hello, I'm Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, lecturer of anthropology at the University of Central Florida. I also regularly consult with various communities in support of grant writing, cultural resource assessment surveys, and other heritage-oriented activities. My primary interests center on the use of digital technologies to support the creation of local, inclusive histories. I previously taught at Monmouth University, after receiving my PhD in Anthropology at the University of Florida in 2011.

Today, I'll be sharing some thoughts and ideas on the historical process. This includes talking about the relationship between historical narratives and facts, and the challenges facing interpreters who want to engage audiences in interpretations that are not only true, but perceived as true. Part of the challenge results from who writes history. We'll move beyond adages about winners writing history to think about emerging ways of knowing the past, ways that remind us how different people experience events in unique ways. These new approaches, which we'll refer to as doing history backwards, move beyond simplistic, linear narratives to embrace the complexity of historical narratives, to celebrate the messiness of writing history. This leads to a discussion of where historical data comes from, and the silences that can often result if we only focus on 'authorized' archives. All of this reminds us of our obligations to the public to craft transparency in the historical process. We'll also explore the sources of historical data, including the creation of inclusive archives through processes like oral history. I'll briefly discuss other sources, some familiar like the federal census and others that are more obscure, like historical aerial photographs and topographic maps. I'll also discuss how old and new sources of data present new opportunities of making these data interactive and exciting. Finally, I'll present a few brief case studies from New Jersey and elsewhere, projects that drew on these emerging trends to meaningfully engage the past, present, and future!

Have you asked yourself, "what makes a historical narrative true?" Does it need to have primary sources? Do charts or maps lend an interpretation the feeling of authenticity? For many, truth can be an emotional response. If a narrative supports the individual's previous assumptions about the world, they consider it true, even factual regardless of how it may or may not engage facts. In many ways, a 'true' historical narrative is a little bit of all these things, and more.

Ultimately, all histories are narratives, or stories we tell ourselves. This includes stories about our families, communities, and the nation at large. Those of us who write histories have an obligation to craft as authentic and inclusive a story as possible. In the past, these histories tended to share a similar structure. These traditional narratives focused on chronology, with one event seamlessly leading to the next. This approach breaks history into manageable chunks, often by focusing on specific events, or even a single large event (like a revolution) and reducing the complexity of historical reality into a series of causal relationships. This event led to that event, and so on. This approach also relies on major historical figures, typically excluding the contributions of everyday citizens like you and me.

Beginning in the 19th and 20th centuries, historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Fernand Braudel sought to craft more narrative-based histories. This approach foregrounded archival research, signaling the development of history as a social science. One result of this was longer histories, focusing on greater periods of time and discussing how numerous events interacted. Focus shifted from overarching narratives singing the praises of charismatic leaders and began focusing on historical themes. These themes not only sought to understand how history was connected to the present, how the past shapes our world, but also sought to illuminates the lives of peoples Eric Wolf referred to as "those without history," or the great multitudes of peoples around the world that were often excluded by traditional historical narratives.

Today's modern narratives craft archival based stories that not only relate historical events to one another but seek to explain why actors – from kings and titans of history to farmers and factory workers – do the things they do. In many ways this is also an anthropological or sociological approach to writing history and is crucial when trying to communicate with the public how the past intersects the future. These connections resonate with modern audiences because we can relate to these experiences. We can understand the decisions that are driving history.

Nearly all of us are familiar with the adage "history is written by the winners." The problem with this saying is it suggests history is not about the interpretation of a factual past but rather about personal and/or political agendas. Historian John Bodnar discusses these "official cultural expressions" as a way to manipulate popular sentiment, to create a "useable past" supporting the status quo. Of course, this is not history and no good history can result from such an approach. Also, there are scores of examples of the 'losers' writing history! The Lost Cause of the Confederacy is a pseudo-historical ideology written by the 'losing side' of the American Civil War. This narrative asserts, among other things that the Civil War was not about slavery (it was), but rather the heroic struggle of an embattled American South against an increasingly aggressive Northern US. This history was written not by the victors, or any serious historian for that matter, but it continues to attract broad support from citizens and lawmakers in a handful of states.

A more recent approach is referred to as "writing history backwards." This centers on documenting and communicating the enormous complexity of past events in a way that connects them to the present, and in ways that helps us imagine better tomorrows. Our traditional view of history is that of a straight line, a temporal arrow smoothly sailing from the past through today and onwards to tomorrow. In reality, the experience of history is much more complex. As Bertell Ollman has observed, "the future is an essential moment in the present." This is not to say that history can predict the future – although predicting anything is impossible with historical knowledge. No, Ollman's observations focus on the future potentials created in the present. These potentials are the expressions of multiple pasts moving past the present. Which future will emerge? This depends on the historical narratives we create, on their accuracy and authenticity. This is another obligation of the historical researcher, to understand how their stories resonate with the present, and understand how these connections might influence our audience in the present, which is to say influence them in the future as well. Although rarely seen as such, doing history is one of the most important ways of creating the future. After all, in the words of famous 20th century philosopher Buckaroo Banzai, "no matter where you go, there you are." You can't know where you are going, or where you are, if you don't know where you've been.

Humorous anecdotes aside, archival work remains central to achieving this goal. Equally important is expanding our concept of what constitutes the archive. After all, not all materials and authors have been treated equally when selecting materials for archiving. First, the production of archival materials in a traditional Western sense focuses on the written word. Not all culture, or even members of our society historically have had written sources or been literate. Is that reason enough to eliminate them from our archives? Of course, not! This focus on written sources, typically in Western languages is what many scholars refer to as the colonial archive. While this phrase is associated with archives related to non-Western locations, such as India, the phrase is apt for multicultural locations like the USA as well, where a similar focus has often excluded non-White, intangible sources like oral histories, song, and cooking culture from being included. Fortunately, historical researchers have many ways of dealing with the biases inherent in colonial archives, a point we'll return to in a moment.

These concerns are not merely academic! Understanding and addressing the biases of historical archives is central to writing powerful historical narratives. Understanding these issues allows us to communicate them to our audiences, and knowing when a source can be presented without comment versus when a sources requires a citation is the key to creating transparency and clarity. We can quickly illustrate the centrality of this with an example from James Loewen's Lies Across America. In Appendix B of this book Loewen asks ten questions that all visitors should ask at a historic site. As historians and interpreters, we should ask the same questions, or at least be able to answer them.

Think back to a historical site or monument you've recently visited. What would your answers be to these questions? (1) When did the historically important event occur at the site? (2) Who sponsored the recognition activities associated with the site? (3) Can we identify any motives of those who undertook commemorating the place? (4) Who was the target audience for the site, it's interpretation, and so forth? What are their values? (5) What role did the government play? Did it

supply funding? (6) Who is left out? (7) Are any of the words or terms problematic? Would you re-write the interpretive signage, for example? (8) Is the site used today? Has the descendant community remained active at the location? (9) What historical sources are used to write the history? (10) Is the interpretation in agreement with those at similar sites? Why or why not?

Loewen's questions are provocative. He argues that monuments are often more reflective of the time they are erected than the time they document or relate to. This ideological aspect of public monuments is today headline news as many Southern states grapple with the legacy of confederate memorials, which were placed not during or immediately following the Civil War, but rather during Jim Crow 40-50 years later. They were placed during a period when African American civil liberties guaranteed by the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments had been eroded. These monuments and their connection to a history of denying civil liberties is only recently being acknowledged.

What is the solution to these dilemma's? Some would suggest we need to center, or perhaps re-center authority and expertise. Others call for a sort of fact free-for-all, where every perspective is equally heard without attention to the concerns that Loewen raises. As is usually the case, I think there is a happy middle ground, where experts can compile and present data alongside their interpretations, and invest in ways of building historical literacy among our audiences. This requires work. We need to build trust, what cultural anthropologists refer to as rapport with our intended audiences. How do we identify these audiences. One quick answer is to have a second look at Loewen's questions. Personally, I think we need to seek as large an audience as possible, which often means returning to basics of the historical process: where does historical data come from, who creates it, who benefits from it, and so forth?

Let's take a few moments and talk about historical data in order to answer some of these questions. Many of us are familiar with at least a couple types of historical data. Typically, we organize data into either primary or secondary data. A primary source usually refers to a document created during the time period being studies, or the event we're trying to interpret. These tend to be first-person accounts such as diaries, government records, court records, property records, newspaper articles, military reports, maps of military movements, military rosters. This includes things like census records because they are collected by people at the time. Secondary sources refer to documents or other records created after an event or time period. These tend to be sources that interpret or analyzes the past in some way. History books are a classic example. Secondary resources make use of primary sources, and in many cases will seek to include some of those sources in the published work. For instance, several "documentary history of X" books include primary sources alongside modern syntheses and/or interpretations.

For most of us, the easiest way to classify something as either primary or secondary is to determine how close to an event or time period the document was created. As such, some sources blur the lines between sources. For instance, autobiographies are first-hand accounts like many other

primary sources, but may be written years or even decades later. Also, since they go through an editorial process and seek to synthesize events within longer narratives, they are typically considered secondary sources. Regardless of whether a resource is classified as either primary or secondary, you never want to assume that they are objective, bias-free representations of the past.

Evaluating sources is a critical part of the historical process, and ultimately applies to both types. We can do this by employing the 5 Ws – Who, What, Where, When, and Why. In many ways, this mirrors the questions recommended by James Loewen previously discussed:

Who wrote the document? Is their own position in relation to the subject likely to produce bias? Also, is the person or persons who wrote the source named? Is there additional information about them? After all, we wouldn't accept a slaveowner's account of the life of enslaved persons as bias free

What is the mission or purpose of the document? In relation to this, what is the intended audience. Was it meant to be public or private? A document written for personal use may include bias but that doesn't automatically invalidate its usefulness for historical research.

Where was the document produced? Similarly, where is the location of the document in relation to the focus? Documents located far away may remain viable, and understanding the reasons behind a document being far from the source may provide additional information regarding the other questions. For instance, property records located in another state may reflect a property owner moving, which might shed additional light on their connections to the source. The where of a source is also important when analyzing online content. Is the information stored on the website of an historical society or educational institution? Does that make it more reliable than a social media site such as Facebook or Twitter? For most historians, the where of primary sources is an important factor in assessing its authenticity.

The When of a source has already been commented on, but we can offer an important exception to this: oral history. Although these first person interviews sometimes include recollections about events and times in a person's past, they also increasingly are collected immediately following events. As such, oral histories offer a powerful way to add oft-overlooked perspectives into the historical archives. We'll return to oral history in a moment.

Why was the document or source created? In many ways, this is the most direct intersection with Loewen's comments above. Answering this question can provide critical insights into the potential ideologies, biases, and issues with a source. As with the Where question, this can be applied to online

sources as well. For instance, "why does this website exist?" Returning to our earlier example about the Lost Cause of the Confederacy myth, locating a primary or secondary source on a website dedicated to teaching about the quote War of Northern Aggression may not be the most reliable place to find such information.

Ultimately, asking these kinds of questions is central to developing historical literacy as historical researchers and social scientists. After all, this is the first step supporting the deeper goal of creating historical literacy among our audiences. Historical literacy is akin to comprehension in that it requires we understand the nuances of sources. It is also more than comprehension because it requires we examine history, and the data we use to craft historical stories from multiple perspectives. Our examination of primary and secondary sources, as well as our ability to asses them support a deeper understanding of the types of texts that exist, and the range of possible uses. As historical researchers, our obligation requires we dig deep into the possible range of sources. This includes finding sources that reveal multiple narratives. We cannot shy away from narratives, even if they contradict one another. Indeed, competing and contradictory narratives can often point to important historical debates, such as the causes of the Civil War. It isn't enough to ignore a perspective because it is false or we disagree with it. Locating and assessing historical sources gives us a deeper appreciation for the value of history in the past, present, and future.

One of the best methods for assessing and evaluating historical sources is to create them! For instance, oral history offers important lessons regarding these topics. The Oral History Association defines Oral history as both a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of individuals, communities, and historical actors. While time doesn't allow for an overview of doing oral history, the Oral History Association as well as most universities and colleges, and well as local historical societies listed here have excellent resources for doing just that.

Crafting oral history projects addresses the questions we've raised about assessing sources and developing historical literacy. Oral history projects arise through themed interests. These may include wanting to know how a certain group experienced specific events, develop a living history archive for a community, and so forth. Since oral histories are collected with specific interests in mind, we can easily answer the Who, What, Where, When, and Why questions. In addition, collecting oral histories offers a powerful way of integrating experiences of groups that are often absent from the historical archive. This is particularly true for minority communities whose experiences have been neglected or actively erased from archives, and by extension the historical stories we share today.

Also, we should recognize oral history's value stretches beyond recording the memories of the elderly. Increasingly, oral history projects center on a particularly issue and collect interviews from all ages, sexes, genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and so forth. My own work with the Hurricane Sandy Oral History Project at Monmouth University ten years ago revealed important insights regarding the experience of various communities across the Jersey Shore during this historical event. Common

themes included a lack of historical memory of previous storms, while differences emerged between neighbors based on their careers, ages, or identity. Also, the ability to collect interviews with the areas African American and other minority communities reminded us how these groups not only have alternative memories associated with such events, but often make use of different support systems in the weeks and months following the initial event.

A final comment about historical sources. Our discussion so far has focused on documents and similar sources. However, how can we learn about past individuals, events, and communities if the documentary record is lacking? A focus on documentary sources might lead us to assume that we cannot reliably talk about these, or that any discussion of them is doomed to being superficial or historical inaccurate. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Indeed, a subdiscipline of archaeology referred to as historical archaeology focuses on exactly these sorts of questions. The Society for Historical Archaeology defines the field as the study of the material remains of past societies that also left behind some historical evidence. Thematically, this tends to focus on the rise of the modern world ove the last 5 or so centuries, and specifically on the development and impact of colonialism, industrialization, and a networked global economic system. Historical archaeology remains a discipline that seeks to seamlessly integrate artifacts, documents, and personal testimony (e.g., oral history) in service of addressing these topics.

Historical archaeology provides a picture of everyday life. The material evidence left behind by past peoples can confirm, inform, or directly contradict documentary-based narratives. Archaeology may add details to further illuminate how an industrial site operated, provide additional details regarding the daily life of lower class immigrants, or provide wholly new information about the lives of enslaved persons. These three examples include decreasingly available documentary evidence, and increasingly benefit from the inclusion of archaeological data. Archaeology also provides a material link to the past, engaging our audience in ways that historical documents may fail to do. So, let's go ahead and shift and look at a couple examples of my own work and other work to sort of illustrate how I do history. How I bring these different forms of data into a conversation.

The first case study I'll discuss is my own research in Rosewood, Florida, where I've been doing a combination of documentary research, geospatial analysis, oral history, documentary filmmaking, and archaeology to explore the destruction of the site of Rosewood, an African American community located here in Florida that had a 50-year history prior to the 1923 event commonly referred to as the Rosewood race riot or massacre. I won't go into a lot of detail about this, but Rosewood was a successful, economically speaking community that emerged following the civil war in a rural part of Florida known as Levy County, which remains rural to this day. Over time and by 1900 it became a majority African American community which experienced the economic ups and downs common to rural communities during the 19th and 20th centuries. Then, in 1923 an allegation by a woman in the neighboring community of Sumner, a white woman who accused an unnamed African American male of

assaulting her sparked a week-long episode of violence that culminated in the systematic burning of every Black-owned building and the violent displacement of the area's African American community. My own research in Rosewood began with documentary evidence, things like census records and property records. Analyzing thousands of property deeds and reconstructing their metes and bounds to understand who owned what, where, and then bringing in things like census information to get a real picture at the household level of the entire destroyed community. When I say a destroyed community, I'm talking in a physical sense. The community, the descendants of Rosewood of course remain a community to this day.

When we brought all of these sources together it allows us to answer important historical questions driven by actual documentary evidence or data. So, facts. Here, for instance is the McCoy farmstead bought shortly after 1900. The McCoy farmstead had about eight people living at this place in 1923. Of course, they fled like other African Americans. Within a few months they sold their property at a rate of about two dollars and ninety cents an acre. So, it's about 140 acres a year later the white men who bought this property subdivided it and were able to sell it at a rate of 10 dollars per acre! The documentary evidence that shows us where people lived has driven a lot of archaeological work. Basically, ground truthing the documentary evidence by finding stuff in the dirt. We've investigated a dozen or so sites and every time this has confirmed the accuracy of the documentary record in relocating homes, businesses, and other structures owned by the African Americans who fled in 1923. All of these data are combined in the construction of a virtual world representing Rosewood as it existed just prior to its destruction in 1923. You can find all of this, teaching materials, access to the virtual world and so forth at virtualrosewood dot com.

Next, I want to shift to an example that we can talk about in New Jersey that brings in some other sources of data that we may not be familiar with, the remarkable Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has digitized versions of their Green Book collection. These books are part of the public consciousness now following the 2018 Green Book movie and the recent HBO series Lovecraft Country based on Matt Ruff's book of the same name. Published between 1936 and 1966, these books provided a growing African American middle class with useful guides for navigating Jim Crow America. Many such resources existed for African Americans during this time. For instance, here's a 1942 Afro-American travel map.

This map conveys much of the same information as the green books in a single image. This map records the names and addresses for approximately 350 hotels, guest houses, and other establishments that provided overnight housing for African American travelers. This information can be geocoded or automatically assigned coordinates using a geographic information systems or GIS program like QGIS or ArcGIS.

Let's look at the five hotels listed in Asbury Park. The first is Wright's Cottage on Bangs Avenue, which was listed as a dwelling in the 1905 Sanborn historical map. Here you can see the location today,

what appears to be an empty lot. Next, is the Hotel Waverly on Dewitt formerly First Avenue, also listed as a dwelling on the Sanborn. Today, the location is a parking lot for the neighboring church. On to the Hotel Carver at the corner of Springwood and Myrtle. Unfortunately, this location is not recorded on the Sanborn map, neither is any specific address listed on the Afro-American travel map. But, some quick property deed work in the local courthouse would tell us which lot it. My money is on that empty lot to the southwest of this intersection, but maybe that's just wishful thinking because I'd like to think that this could be archaeologically investigated. The Hotel Metropolitan at 1200 Springfield is up next. Not to be confused with the larger Metropolitan Hotel, this hotel is remembered today as the Turf Club, although the 1905 Sanborn clearly labels the site as the home of this hotel. And, finally the Whitehead Hotel on Atkins is listed as such in 1905, suggesting a long and interesting history to this hotel.

So, this case study highlights how, with a relatively small amount of time combining various historical data helps to reveal previously hidden histories. Of course, in Asbury Park researchers from Monmouth University led by Dr Hetty Williams are doing exactly this sort of work in Asbury Park with their Paradoxical Paradise project, in a town that remains sharply divided along lines of race as revealed by mapping 2020 census data. This work is not only important but timely as America continues to grapple with various pasts.

Let's quickly look at a couple examples from Cape May, where two hotels are present on the map. The first is the Hotel de Griff at 830 Corgi Street, which is today the site of a large house. Again, further research would be required to understand the relationship of the present structure to any historical buildings at the site. Is this house the converted hotel, or is this house built after the hotel burned or was abandoned? Right, what are these interesting questions we'd have to do more work. Next, is the Richardson Hotel, which appears as the same named location on the historic Sanborn. Today, the structure that stands at the spot is likely related to that historic African American hotel. Again, additional research would be needed. The building looks like it dates to that time period, the late 19th or early 20th century. So, again lots of fascinating potential research projects all around us. However, unlike Asbury Park, there are few African Americans living in the vicinity today. So, are we forgetting about this history? Has it been commemorated locally? I apologize if it has. I haven't been to Cape May in a long time and looked at these places. This is what I can do remotely in preparation for this video.

In conclusion, history is everywhere, all around us, of course. However, much of it is hidden from our immediate view. Finding creative ways of exploring the various data is key to revealing these forgotten and hidden histories. Today, more than ever, Americans realize the importance of feeling connected to their homes, whether their families have been here for generations, or if they are new arrivals on our shores. Knowing about your local past is crucial for building those connections. Those of us privileged enough to investigate the past have a duty to tell as complete and truthful a narrative as possible. Fortunately, the accessibility of primary and secondary sources, as well as the eagerness of communities to share their histories, means we have better access to more information than ever before. It really is a very exciting time to do history!

Thank you Revolution New Jersey for making this video possible, and thank you for watching it.