

Absence

absence, *n.* Want, lack, privation, or failure of something.

Nesbit, Thomas B. Autograph document, signed, Callaway Co., MO, 1853 January 2.

Green, Brian. Autograph document, signed, Wake County, NC, 1852 January 19.

Bramham, A.W. Autograph letter, signed, Stoney Point, VA, 1858 April 16, to Albert G. Dade, Westmore Land Co., VA

Absences in the historical record lead to a skewed definition of authority. Representative manuscripts such as personal letters and records of the sale of slaves demonstrate how documentation of slave owners is readily available, while documentation of the enslaved is scarce. Enslavers and traders have full names and occupations, and have accounts written in their voices, while the enslaved are represented only through the words of others, and typically have only first names, ages, and an indication of their monetary value (Calvin, age 34, sold for \$650 in 1852; Eliza, age 9, sold for \$500 in 1853). Historians make great efforts to counter these absences in the historical record by drawing on oral histories, closely reading the few sources authored by the enslaved, and reexamining the accounts of enslavers with a critical lens.

The segment focused on absence was striking to me as it not only related to our archive class, but to other ones I'm currently taking, Latinos in New York and Introduction to American Studies, both of which focus on the histories of people that often go untold. I went to a high school that had 3 years of U.S. history and I still find myself having huge gaps in my knowledge of history as they don't pertain to White, middle-class Americans.

When I saw this piece, I instantly thought of Indigenous peoples and their complete absence when discussing the history of our nation. In many ways, they're seen as passive, as allowing history to happen to them. They are described as simply casualties of war and not really people, an idea enforced by the lack of their stories, tradition, and culture being taught in schools, thereby enforcing the idea that it's not important. The destruction of archives, as told in the essay, allows for the construction of a new society. By erasing the history of the indigenous people, the European colonizers were able to create a new society which promoted ideals of freedom and equality, values which they violated in order to create their nation.

This inspired me to briefly research any archives focused on indigenous people, of which I found barely anything, as represented by the pictures of the left. This left me with the question, if we recognize that omission and absence are problems, how do we solve them if they're rooted in the history and problems of generations ago?

American Indian Records in the National Archives

Please note: Very few of these records have been digitized and made available online.

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Representative

When I read the piece on “representative”, the first thing that came to mind was our government, a body of rich White men representing a country of which they do not relate to the majority. Ideally, a group of people will be able to pick their representative, but the truth is that there is power involved in that decision and it is not always left up to that group. They have no choice in who speaks for them, which affects their position in society because they are unable to dictate how they choose to be seen by people. For example, in the pictures of the indigenous peoples on the left, a photographer decided to depict what he thought to be “authentic” pictures of indigenous people in an attempt to represent them. Because the people themselves did not control this, it was inaccurate and ultimately did more harm than any good.

Additionally, there are questions of specificity and who is even deserving of representation. Continuing with the subject of indigenous people, when they are represented, it's as an entire body, ignoring the fact that there are hundreds of different tribes with different customs and therefore no one type of native American. So when deciding on the idea of representation for a group, how specific or general should it be? Regardless of the answer, the fact still stands that there are people and communities that still receive no representation at all, be it in the media, political, or archival.

representative, *adj.* That speaks or acts on behalf of a wider body or group of people.

John Hawkesworth, (1715?-1773)

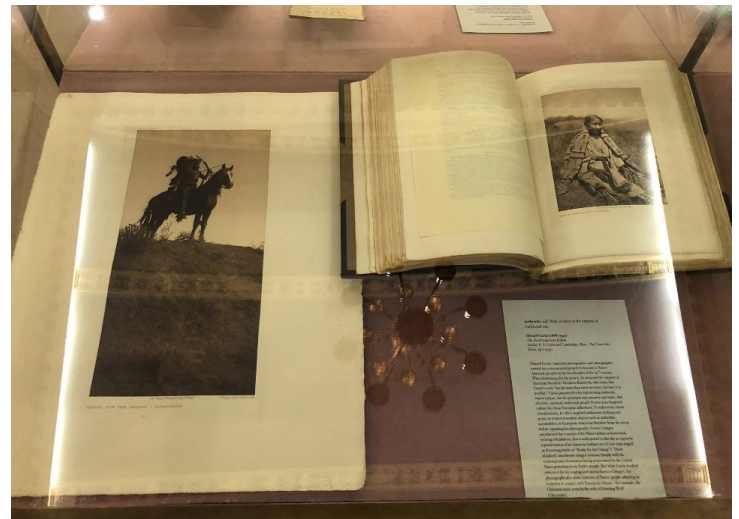
An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of His present Majesty...

London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773

A new voyage round the world, in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, and 1771

New York: Printed by James Rivington, 1774

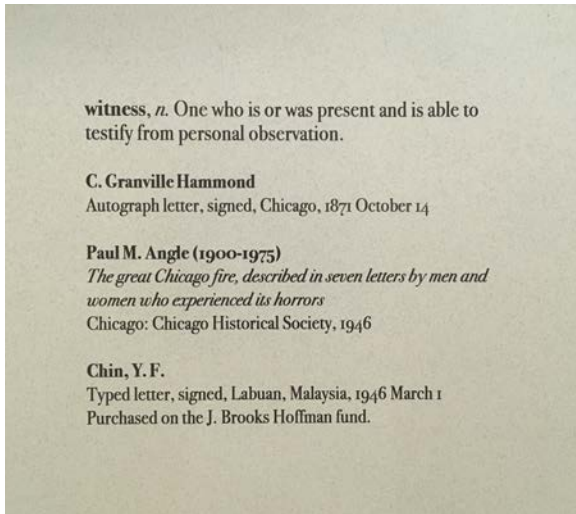
The circulation of printed illustrations in the 17th and 18th centuries allowed images to become iconic and representative, even in the absence of personal experience of the subject. Captain James Cook, who is being commemorated in 2018, 250 years after completing his surveys of North America, carried out significant voyages to the Pacific that had a profound impact on the inhabitants of Hawai'i, New Zealand, and Australia. His expeditions resulted in scientific and ethnographic surveys that introduced depictions of Native people of the Pacific and North America to Europeans. For many Europeans, these images were their only encounters with representations of Native people.



authentic native american



Witness



“Archives give nations meaning”.
A country is rooted in it’s history; Without the story of its past, it ceases to exist. People and society need to know from where they once came in order to know the way forward. The way we get our history is by those who bear witness to events and recount them. History is really nothing more than people just telling their side of the story, which means that it isn’t always reliable.

Which witness and whose story is worth being retold?

In King Phillips’ War, fought between the indigenous people and the colonizers, there were witnesses on both sides, and yet we only really hear from those on one side. When we look at artifacts from those times, we read settlers journals rather than the written oral stories of the indigenous people who witnessed the bloodshed the Europeans brought.

For every event that has and will occur, there will always be people present who saw it happen and will tell their stories. It’s our job to question who will we listen to, how much weight do we give to differing accounts? We must question how we decide which stories are worth telling, if someone witnesses what they consider a significant event but we find it unimportant, how do we grapple with that?

The act of witnessing is not the most vital aspect of this section, it is the act of listening.

