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Whose Stories Matter?

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By Danielle Koepke

I'm scrolling through Instagram and it hits me - this is how our generation will be remembered. These seemingly fleeting posts are how many people share the stories that matter in their daily lives. Those Instagram posts could be viewed as artifacts. Decades from now, there will be kids in some sort of school, learning some sort of history. Will social media posts be included? Who will decide what artifacts will become markers of this generations' history?

What counts as an artifact?

I'm in a seminar this semester titled "The History of Rhetoric and Writing Studies." So far, we've considered how impossible it is to write an accurate history. How can a researcher truly understand not only the events that mark a time period, but also how a person would be feeling as they lived their day-to-day lives during that time period? Every history written is just someone else's account of a past event, but none are the end-all-be-all by themselves. A feminist lens on the historiography of rhetoric strives to expand what counts as history, and what counts as an artifact of history.

Julie Cruikshank writes about historical artifacts and narratives in her article "[Oral History, Narrative Strategies, and Native American Historiography: Perspectives from the Yukon Territory, Canada.](#)" Her research involves long term relational building with two women who over time tell their community histories to Cruikshank through oral narratives and songs. They re-purposed cultural stories with a powerful rhetorical dexterity that was contextually driven. One woman, Sidney, uses the same story four different times over the course of a span of many years, in four different specific ways, for four specific purposes, directed at four different audiences (16).

The narratives these women tell are historical artifacts. They are not recited from a book or recorded anywhere. These women show how "the act of storytelling provides ways of making historical changes understandable" (Cruikshank 5). Later on, these artifacts are discounted merely as beliefs when used in the Supreme Court in the case of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, reinforcing the idea that "what academics (historians, anthropologists, judges) write is 'history' and that local practices are 'data' for those official histories" (23). Views such as this are harmful to the valuable local histories that are represented in community practices.

How do we view our own local and day-to-day cultural practices? Would we view our social media creations as just possible 'data' for 'official' accounts of our own history? Or would we view them as something more valuable?

This leads me back to social media, where I've been following Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez ([@AOC](#)) and Greta Thunberg ([@GretaThunberg](#)), who have recently [met in person](#)! I scroll through tweets on Twitter and tap through stories on Instagram, and what these women share impacts me. I screenshot one of their posts and share it with my own followers on Instagram.

Like the women Cruikshank learns from, if I share a story in four different ways through four social media platforms, am I also using narrative to achieve different purposes, for different audiences, in different contexts? I would say, yes. As time passes, we re-purpose stories in order to help make meaning in new situations within our local (and online) communities.

The narratives of these women anchored their credibility in their community's cultural histories, and they use those historical artifacts as a way to be rhetorical within those communities. We just might be doing similar things today, in other spaces. In our day-to-day lives, we create artifacts that reflect ourselves, our values, and our cultures. Certainly, not all Instagram posts carry the cultural and historiographical value Cruikshank is discussing. However, it's worth considering what counts as a historical artifact and whose stories matter.