

## Invisible Evidence: The Story is There, but the Sources are Scarce

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Becky Karnes, a high school English teacher, completed a graduate-level writing course on new pedagogical approaches to teaching writing. “We learned how to develop good writing from the inside, starting with calling the child’s voice out,” she said of the course. When asked if she was excited to return to school to implement some of the techniques she learned, Ms. Karnes said, “Oh no, there’s no time to do creative writing and develop authentic voice. That would take weeks and weeks. There are three essays on the state test and we start prepping right at the start of the year. We have to teach to the state test.”<sup>1</sup> Discussions about school curriculum today are framed by this binary—the intellectual desire to explore various pedagogical approaches and the imperative to teach to the test to achieve quantitative results. For history teachers, the freedom to not teach to the test opens many possibilities: veering away from the textbook to focus on works by many authors, using primary source documents, and delving into a range of topics, going narrow and deep rather than wide and thin.

Numerous education scholars have offered suggestions for how to teach with these techniques and how to make lessons interesting through the use of different sources. My recent work on the history of missionary schooling for Native Americans, however, raised some challenging questions: how does one teach about those histories for which the sources are scarce?

What does one do when the story is there, but the sources are absent? Are we, as history teachers and scholars, confined to those histories that we are able to document fully, or is there a place for speculation in our teaching of history? At its essence, these questions point to larger ones about how and if we should aim to re-construct the “truth” about the past and how we assess that truth.

In the early spring of 2004, I came across a short history written by Sister Liguori Mason in the archives of the American motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity in Stella Niagara, New York. This 200-page history, a compilation of diaries, interviews, and clerical narratives, documented a history of Catholic missionary work on the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota, from 1870 to 1930.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Mason’s work illustrated the significant role that her colleagues, Catholic nuns, played in founding, organizing, and managing schools for Native American children in the nascent West. In her narrative, Mason traced these women’s journeys from Swiss and Belgian monasteries to the American motherhouse in Stella Niagara, New York, to the American West. Based on oral histories and journals, Sister Mason described the sisters’ journey crossing the prairie in a large wagon drawn by two horses: “As far as the eye could reach there stretched miles and miles of somber, frozen grass into which the gentle touch of Spring had not yet brought life and colour; not a tree, not even a log hut loomed up against the sky, only now and then a frightened rabbit or a partridge scudded away from the advancing vehicle.”<sup>3</sup> It was nearly five o’clock when they finally reached the mission house where they were greeted by Indians who had come, “dressed in their best,” to welcome the Shina Sapa (Blackrobe) and the Winyan Wakan (holy women).<sup>4</sup> This peaceful encounter, according to Sister Mason’s account, ended with the Indians crowding into Father Stephan’s room, where “Peace pipes were produced and soon the whole house was filled with the fumes of peace.”<sup>5</sup>

Mason’s story illustrated several key insights: her narrative was another example countering a body of scholarship characterizing the West as a “masculine” space [read: the “wild” West, the image of the cowboy], yet unique in its illustration of the role that Catholic religious women played in those efforts.<sup>6</sup> The transnational journey of the sisters pointed to another insight: while immigration scholars have focused on European immigration to northeastern cities throughout the nineteenth century, these European nuns were headed West as part of transnational efforts to “win” the West for Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> The West, for Catholics and Protestants alike, was the “battleground” on which the fight for denominational dominance was to take place—both were interested in “winning” this newly settled region of the United States in efforts for denominational dominance within national and global contexts. Instead of a distinctly American story, this

western story was transnational in nature. Furthermore, women were at the center of these “civilizing” efforts—focused on Native Americans and using schools as their means—that were the metaphorical weapons in this denominational war.

A year later, after my excitement over this initial finding faded, I was confronted with another reality: my searches for evidence from these women in archives across the country had come up empty. Nor could I find any evidence from the Native Americans who went to or sent their children to the St. Francis School, the Catholic missionary school founded by the Sisters of Charity. My only hope was the numerous official documents recorded by the male Catholic hierarchy in the Jesuit archives at places like Marquette University, the federal records house in the National Archives, and a series of general accounts of western missionary work at the Center for Western Studies in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. While these documents told the story of the creation and development of Catholic missionary schools like St. Francis and mentioned the important work that nuns were doing, they failed to offer insights from women or Native American perspectives. I was confronted with a critical problem: I knew that there was an important story to tell, but I was lacking the evidence to tell it. Was it worth proceeding? Could I reconstruct this story, giving justice to the actors at its center—women and natives—in an effective way? Or was it better to let the story go without disrupting the dominant narrative of the masculine West, without illustrating the significant role that European religious women played in what had been characterized as a distinctly American region, and without showing that women’s “civilizing” efforts were at the center of the denominational “battles” to “win” the West. These “battles,” as it turned out, also proved false: on the frontier, as my research further revealed, female-led missionary movements by Protestants and Catholics showed that, rather than fighting for dominance, women worked together across denominations toward the same goals: “civilizing,” Christianizing, and “Americanizing” natives (yes, even the European Catholic nuns were committed to these Americanizing goals).<sup>8</sup>

I proceeded with the project, but as a historian and a teacher who teaches teachers, I continued to grapple with the complexities of how to bring such unrepresented stories into the classroom. My own research challenges reminded me of those of my former teacher, Martha Hodes, who, in her research on Eunice Stone (the working class white woman who in 1869 married Smiley Connolly, a sea captain of African descent living on Grand Cayman Island) negotiating the racial and class boundaries across those geographic regions wrote, “The Davis Papers seemed so promising at first, yet like so many historical documents thick with words, they proved also, in many ways resolutely mute. In each phase of Eunice’s life, it turned

out, one pivotal question remained unanswerable in any definitive way.”<sup>9</sup> Recognizing, finally, that Eunice’s silences were as important as the information she chose to include in her letters, Hodes concluded:

Although I set out to learn as much as I possibly could about Eunice, I also wanted to respect the archival record that she and her family helped to create, including all that they intentionally omitted or purged, for the consequences of those actions are also part of Eunice’s story. Although at times I have extrapolated beyond the most literal evidence of the letters, I have invented nothing; instead, I invoke words like “perhaps,” “maybe,” and “probably” where it is impossible to know precisely what came to pass or how people felt. In place of fiction, I offer the craft of history, assisted by the art of speculation.<sup>10</sup>

Eunice’s letters did not explicitly address the issues present in the scholar’s mind, such as her direct views on race, ethnicity, or class in the geographic and social contexts of her life. The nuns and Sioux at the heart of my story left behind little to trace their thoughts, feelings, and views on the role of missionary schooling on reservations and white/native encounters. However, these omissions serve as powerful reminders of the importance of valuing absences in the historical record just as we value what is recorded. They also point to the differences between those questions forged by twenty-first-century scholars and how they differ from the thoughts on the minds of the historical actors who form the subject of scholarly inquiry. Finally, these absences remind us of what Hodes calls the “craft of history,” allowing room to fill in the gaps of the stories we tell with careful, informed speculation. This nuanced approach to history is one that no test can measure.

In her novel, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, author Annie Dillard reminds us, “The gaps are the thing. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe.”<sup>11</sup> Let’s not shy away from historical subjects, even when the evidence is scarce. Let’s go into the gaps and search for “a universe.” By aiming to be historians and teachers who search for unrepresented subjects and who seek to bring light to the stories lost by history, we teach our students that history is not just a series of names and dates. On the contrary, history is comprised of gaps that we can fill by piecing together evidence, placing it in informed social and historical contexts, and learning the art of speculation often necessary in the “craft of history.”

## Notes

1. Michael Winerip, "Study Great Ideas, but Teach to the Test," *New York Times*, 13 July 2005.
2. Written by Sister Liguori Mason around 1925, this source, "History of the American Foundation of the Sisters of Penance and Christian Charity of the Third Order of St. Francis, 1874-1924," is based largely on oral histories and personal records of nuns who worked on the St. Francis mission, as well as on primary research from Catholic and secular periodicals. This manuscript, according to archivist Sister Mary Serbacki, is considered to be the order's most reliable history of missionary work at St. Francis. Its author, Sister Mason, was a long-time, trusted member of the Sisters of Charity and a resident at Stella Niagara who knew many of the women on whom she based her history.
3. Sister Liguori Mason, "History of the American Foundation of the Sisters of Penance and Christian Charity of the Third Order of St. Francis, 1874-1924" [ca. 1925], 200 p., American Motherhouse Archives, Sisters of Charity, Stella Niagara, New York, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*
6. For other examinations of women in the West from primarily Protestant perspectives, see Julie Roy Jeffrey, "*Civilizing*" the West? 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998) and *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford, 1990); and Susan Yohn, *A Contest of Faiths: Missionary Women and Pluralism in the American Southwest* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1995).
7. Angelyn Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (New York: Orbis, 1988), 319.
8. See the introduction and chapter 2 of my manuscript, *Education for "Civilization": Denominational Consensus and Missionary Education on the Rosebud Reservation, 1870-1920*.
9. Martha Hodes, *The Sea Captain's Wife* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 34.
10. *Ibid.*, 36.
11. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974), 274.

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