

Pop-Culture Patriotism: American Heroes in the Age of Technology

Comparative Media Studies Category

CM230

Introduction

The advent of Internet access at the close of the twentieth century significantly changed many academic disciplines—notably, that of American history within the public education system. Conservative trends in U.S. history education helped to mass-produce a limited version of the nation’s past that excluded multicultural perspectives from classroom discussion. However, groundbreaking digital resources fought against this current in the 1990s and 2000s. Digital-library projects created by the Library of Congress in the early 1990s paved the way for the creation of more comprehensive and substantial public-access databases, notably the DPLA (Digital Public Library of America). As a new generation of history students gained access to primary sources that had not undergone biased redaction by historians, a shift occurred within American patriotism—and a different digital platform, YouTube, proved key to developing and spreading these changes within the presentation and reception of traditional American narratives through the dissemination of educational videos and historical parodies. As for the narrators of this new brand of history, these pop-culture patriots enacted massive reforms on the public understanding of its nation’s past, ensuring that the American history curriculum was poised to meet the demands of a more liberal-minded and diverse audience.

Early initiatives towards archival digitization made by the Library of Congress

The American Memory project, begun in 1990 by the Library of Congress in an effort to provide schools across the nation with a more substantial collection of historical media, was an innovative pilot program designed to gauge the need for a digital library of its extensive records. This pioneering digital library (DL) transferred documents, videos, audio files, and visual media

relevant to the nation's past to CD-ROM format, distributing the materials to forty-four schools and libraries nationwide ("About American Memory - Mission and History"). In its own words, the DL consists of "unique or rare Americana that will be particularly valuable to researchers, students, educators, and lifelong learners" ("American Memory Help"). It may, in fact, have been the first official DL project undertaken by a library of its type (Nitecki & Abels 56). Based upon user evaluations received from its forty-four participant institutions, the American Memory project was a success—but an expensive one, as creating and distributing CD-ROMs soon proved to be much less efficient than simply storing those digitized files within an online library, which the pilot project's successor, the National Digital Library Program (NDLP), began to do in 1995 ("Library of Congress National Digital Library Program"). Bolstered by the positive feedback garnered by the American Memory project, and made possible by a private-sector donation of \$13 million in late 1994, the NDLP significantly furthered the expansion of the Library of Congress's digital records, as the Library set the goal of digitizing 5 million files by 2000, an objective it would surpass considerably ("About American Memory - Mission and History"). Within the eyes of fellow institutions and corporations, the NDLP quickly gained traction as an initiative with boundless potential for the American educational system, receiving \$45 million in sponsorship from 1994 to 2000 ("About American Memory - Mission and History"). The efforts of the Library of Congress to render library archives accessible to the American public were not limited to the resources at its own disposal; in fact, the Library incentivized other institutions to follow its footsteps in archival digitization through a three-year competition, beginning in 1996, wherein competing institutions were tasked with making their American history collections available online, resulting in the creation of twenty-three American

Memory mirror programs to further enlighten the American public with previously-inaccessible resources (“About American Memory - Mission and History”). Through the American Memory and NDLP projects, the Library of Congress took steps to create a more varied audience for historical discussion, even as America moved into an age of technology.

Demonstrated need for a diversified base of primary sources within the education system

When the Library of Congress had only begun to harness the possibilities of the Internet, and the NDLP was still in an early stage of growth, a 1995 Senate case halted the progress of a recently-proposed set of history standards that had been designed to promote multicultural American perspectives. At the head of the standards’ champions was American historian Gary Nash, co-chair of the History Standards Project. Gary Nash had recognized the nation’s lack of accessibility to unbiased sources, as well as the suppression of historical information regarding traditionally oppressed groups in the United States; like the American Memory program, his proposed standards promoted “using literature, art, architecture, music, and other rich sources to better allow the student to understand the warp and woof of past ages, peoples, and cultural perspectives” (“Gary Nash, *Reflections on the National History Standards*”). The standards created under the leadership of Nash and his co-chair, Charlotte Crabtree, created a learning environment more firmly based in multiculturalism, political correctness, and critical thinking about the American social climate (“Gary Nash, *Reflections on the National History Standards*”). This environment, however, soon came under direct fire from Lynne Cheney, a conservative reporter for the Wall Street Journal, who declared that “the standards suffered from ‘multicultural excess,’ a ‘grim and gloomy’ portrayal of American history” (“Gary Nash,

Reflections on the National History Standards”). These accusations fueled a backlash that would doom Nash and Crabtree’s work with a 99-1 Senate vote to stop the standards from enacting change upon the traditional curriculum that had become a staple in most schools across the country (Labadie 113).

With the destruction of the national history standards, the status quo of U.S. history education in the early 1990s was maintained. The exclusion of female/non-white heroes from the pages of history textbooks continued to emphasize masculinity and whiteness as the ideal traits of a model American; thus, the pantheon of American heroes, as portrayed in mainstream media and education, did not reflect upon the diversity of the American population. As a new generation of schoolchildren received access to this limited and biased version of U. S. history, pioneering projects such as American Memory and the NDLP were designed to fill a need for the greater visibility of different cultures and voices within accounts of national history.

The American Memory DL program and its reception by early participants

After its inception in 1990, the American Memory program gradually grew into a major DL—in fact, one of the largest DLs existing today, as it currently consists of over 100 collections and 9 million items (“American Memory Help”). However, in the early 1990s, the nascent program was limited to the storage capacity of a CD-ROM; the forty-four institutions receiving this CD-ROM as participants in the program, as libraries belonging to schools, universities, and states, completed a user evaluation in 1992 and 1993 to help the Library of Congress ascertain the projected need for the resource it had created (“About American Memory - Mission and

History”). Within the introduction to the since-published American Memory User Evaluation, the project leaders identified the target audience:

. . . American Memory's primary audience is the broad educational community, encompassing K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and public libraries. In the near term, the K-12 school community is viewed as American Memory's initial "core" audience (American Memory User Evaluation: Introduction).

By selecting a core audience of students receiving their formative years of education in American history and patriotism, the Library of Congress personnel tasked with creating American Memory sought to create a catalyst for changes to the nation’s understanding of its past, one that would receive praise and affirmation from its first participants. A reviewer from the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg, of North Carolina, remarked, “Obviously, this is the first effort toward enlarging the American public's access to these types of materials; I hope it will be successful” (“American Memory User Evaluation: American Memory in Public Libraries”).

To a new and more diverse generation of learners, the American Memory project opened doors to new, unbiased information—entryways that would transform the country’s notions of American history. According to the report on primary and secondary schools, the majority of teachers using the resources provided by American Memory were using primary sources in the classroom for the first time; of the other historical resources available at the time, one evaluator commented, "There is nothing else out there that is primary material. They have all been processed by somebody and have their viewpoint” (“American Memory User Evaluation: American Memory in the Schools, K-12”). This is to say that many of the young students using

the American Memory program were gaining a new reading experience—in other words, one that had not been distorted or framed by the ideologies of a textbook editor. Thus, the American Memory project provided its diverse student base with a better representation of the nation’s multiculturalism, especially as those students’ textbooks failed to do so. In the words of the program itself, “American Memory, unlike other materials, requires the student to think independently” (“American Memory User Evaluation: American Memory in the Schools, K-12”). The American Memory project thus proved itself to be the early prototype of an essential tool of information: it encouraged the students using it to question and think critically about the information presented to them, preparing them to form their own opinions and challenge the status quo approved by the conservative educators and lawmakers in charge of designing their curricula.

Limitations of the American Memory program and the rise of the DPLA

Yet the American Memory program was—and continues to be—limited. While American Memory and the NDLP were “early trailblazers in providing historical artifacts and legislative information on the Web,” they soon lost traction at the head of the pack, falling into the shadows of such digital-information titans as Google and, in more recent years, the DPLA (Digital Public Library of America) (Farkas). The Digital Public Library of America, launched in 2013, is, in the words of its founding chairman, John Palfrey, “grounded in the fundamental library principle of ‘free to all,’” combining “a group of rich, interesting digital collections from state and regional digital archives, with the special collections of major university libraries and federal collections” (Palfrey 97). Two decades after the onset of American Memory, inspired by the same democratic

and inclusive notions of information-sharing, the DPLA creators did what the Library of Congress could not, plagued as it was by management issues and obsolete copyright laws (Farkas). They created a project that allowed public access to a digital library that drew from a much greater pool of resources, spanning library networks on a national scale; thus, the DPLA joined forces with other libraries in a meaningful relationship that has resulted in public access to 7.5 million curated objects in its database after only two years (Palfrey 101).

The egalitarian, equal-opportunity philosophy of the DPLA, thus unencumbered by the copyright laws and limited outreach that had spelled out stagnation for its predecessor, the American Memory program, met the needs of an increasingly diverse base of students, researchers, and citizens curious about their nation's past. Indeed, the DPLA "is intended to encourage the active participation of citizens" as the program continues, with the support of the public and its many partner institutions, to become "what we, the people, decide to make it, as a shared, public-spirited resource" (Palfrey 103).

The role of YouTube within changes to history's presentation

Despite their technological limitations, the DL projects of the Library of Congress provided excellent models for future alteration, demonstrating the demand for a program that promoted inclusivity and visibility of various perspectives within discussions of American history. As American Memory overshot its goal of uploading five million items to its database in 2000, oppressed and minority groups received increasingly content-rich access to the traditionally suppressed history of their ethnicity or gender: as early as 1993, for example, American Memory provided a collection entitled "African-American Pamphlets from the Daniel

A. P. Murray Collection, 1820-1920,” composed of 350 pamphlets written by African-American authors (“American Memory User Evaluation: Introduction”). Yet another important victory for inclusivity within American history came in May of 2005, when the launching of YouTube provided users with a new platform for spreading information—information that was made visible to the world once its URL was entered. Evidenced by the 2 billion daily views measured in 2010, YouTube quickly became a popular source of entertainment for people across the globe (Fitzpatrick). This pop-culture platform, however, would serve a different purpose within the U.S. history community: it provided history students and enthusiasts with a new opportunity to disseminate information previously obscured by historians, as well as to condemn the exclusive version of American history presented in their textbooks.

The manifestations of these opportunities formed a unique addition to the historical community. Often created in a satirical vein that fit well with YouTube’s entertaining nature, these easily-accessed historical videos helped to form an informative digital counterculture to the conservative version of American history created by historians of the Nineties and the decades before. These videos took the work of the DLs one step further, however; they did not only allow a broad wealth of scholarly resources to circulate beyond like-minded scholarly communities, but also promoted the liberal political views of a new generation by lampooning the traditional (and often exclusive) values that they had been taught in school. In this way, the nascent historians of the Age of Technology created a sort of “pop-culture patriotism”: using public-access platforms receiving major traffic by younger generations in particular, YouTubers such as Brad Neely and John Green helped to publicize previously unpopular, but more historically accurate, versions of traditional American narratives, reaching a culturally-diverse

base of users and effecting change in that group's understanding of American history and its many heroes.

Analysis of "Washington" and the exaggeration of masculinity within American heroes

Such revolutionary historical videos, however, were not noticed only by members of younger generations. Professor Susan Burgess, of Ohio University's Department of Political Science, dubbed YouTube's influence on U.S. history and political science "a new kind of constitutional theory" in a 2011 study entitled "Youtube on Masculinity and the Founding Fathers: Constitutionalism 2.0" (Burgess 120). Within the study, Burgess expressed the view that YouTube was among the "new sources of constitutional understanding," while such discussions had historically retained "an elite focus" (Burgess 121). Her article sought to "[integrate] populist takes on masculinity, paternity, and the founding fathers into the scholarly academic debate," forcing "the familiar academic discussion" to collide with the "unpedigreed and dissenting parodies" of YouTube (Burgess 121). In particular, she analyzed the subversive blows taken by a single video at mainstream accounts of the nation's past—and that video was *Washington*, created by animator Brad Neely in 2009 and boasting over 1.2 million hits as of 2011 (Burgess 124).

Like many of its equivalents, *Washington* offers up a collision of pop-culture and academia; Neely combines many traditional scholarly accounts of Washington's hero-like attributes—great size, presence, demeanor—with the undeniably irreverent, as where a simple style of animation is delivered with narration delivered in rap-style verse (Burgess 124). The video is equally rife with silly, supernatural accounts of his habits ("On a horse made of crystal

he patrolled the land...”) (Neely). Noting that *Washington* pokes fun at the Founding Father’s mythical size, Burgess writes that Washington’s “large stature is emphasized and connected to his authority” within academic discussions of the man and his political greatness (Burgess 125). The video also lambastes the exaggerated masculinity which Washington is traditionally said to have embodied; by declaring that the formidable Founding Father “ate opponents’ brains,” and by showing the cartoon figure lifting up a giant bull and tossing it into the distance to prove his great strength, *Washington* shows its audience that within American history, Washington’s hero status has many strings attached—strings of masculine dominance (Neely). More often than not, the trait of masculinity serves as the identifying attribute of an American deity, and history books continue to emphasize Washington’s stunning feats of bravery and larger-than-life persona as integral parts of his character, a puzzling truth upon which Dr. Burgess has not failed to comment. In her words, the “exaggerations and humor” of *Washington* “reveal . . . the absurdity of much of masculinity and related claims to power” (Burgess 129). In her conclusion, Burgess praised YouTube as a revolutionary tool for change, saying that “pop culture provides an alternative platform that might allow . . . us to escape” the traditional and confining narratives of conventional American history (Burgess 129).

Analysis of “Slavery—Crash Course U.S. History #13” and changes to the historiography of slavery

In *Washington*, Neely opted to create a short satirical video, one whose primary purpose was to educate with entertainment, not directly-identifiable scholarship. Three years earlier, in 2006, a different YouTube creation sought to offer its readers the same unconventional take on

American history, alongside other subjects; yet it did so in the format of traditional school lectures—with facts evoking dimensions of U.S. history that were generally left obscured in the average American classroom. “Crash Course,” a YouTube channel created and led by brothers John and Hank Green, now features a sizable playlist of videos created to educate the world on U.S. history; that playlist now consists of 48 videos and a total watch count of 15,788,629 views, as this report is written . . . and counting (CrashCourse).

Notable among these videos is *Slavery—Crash Course U.S. History #13*, or *Slavery*. In comparison to earlier history-textbook chapters dedicated to covering the subject, *Slavery* is revolutionary, a refreshing catalyst for changes to the historiography of slavery, especially in regards to the agency of slaves within the oppressive plantation environment. In order to fully appreciate the promise of *Slavery*, consider this excerpt from a 1990 grade-school history textbook by Roger LaRaus, Harry P. Morris, and Robert Sobel, entitled *Challenge of Freedom*:

Most slaves hated slavery. They often felt anger and bitterness toward their masters, and almost all slaves longed for freedom . . . The slave codes that grew over the years in the antebellum South were most often cruel and unfair towards slaves. . . . Slaves had no more legal rights than did livestock or other personal belongings . . . Slave codes worked to restrict slaves in every way possible (qtd. in Ward 206).

Challenge of Freedom's crimes are those of omission. Certainly, slaves hated the cruel and brutal system that treated them as chattel; indeed, that system attempted to dehumanize them through the strict legal measures of slave codes. Yet the textbook's authors show that system merely as a framework of oppressive laws, governed vaguely by faceless slaveowners; in the words of the book itself, slave codes, not influential Southern white men looking to avoid

industrialization by increasing the output of their agrarian economy, worked to restrict slaves in every way possible. Furthermore, *Challenge of Freedom* fails to mention the agency of those slaves—slaves such as Nat Turner and his many brave followers, who, despite their masters’ attempts to suppress them, fought against the brutality and oppression of the coercive system that attempted to control them. Rather, the textbook chooses to portray slaves as the victims of inhumane, authorless laws, powerless to combat slaveowners’ efforts to dehumanize them.

Slavery does not make these errors. Green begins by discussing the role of slavery as a source of profit for whites in the North and the South, elaborating on the incorrect post-Civil War view that the North had always existed as the great enemy of slavery. According to the video, the North “wouldn’t have been able to industrialize” without cotton, or “at least not as quickly,” because “cotton textiles were . . . the most important commodity in world trade by the nineteenth century” (Green). By including the North as a participant in the continuation of slavery, *Slavery* offers a new perspective on the role of slavery in both regions of the United States, showing that white men and women on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line benefited from the economic system of slavery, and were responsible for allowing it to continue.

Slavery does not limit the discussion of slavery to the perspectives of oppressors and bystanders. Rather than presenting slaves as utterly powerless and defenseless against the abusive environment of the plantation, Green mentions the ways in which some slaves were able to undermine the institution of slavery that held them in bondage, and occasionally break free of it. By mentioning the importance of slave families within and between plantations, religious meetings, and institutions such as the Underground Railroad, all ways in which slaves challenged the authority of their masters, the video provides its readers with a more comprehensive look at

both sides of the system of slavery, a perspective that gives agency and power to the slaves that worked to undermine that system's power (Green).

Green also creates a clearer picture of the Southern slaveowner. Intriguingly, not only does this portrait include yeoman farmers who rented slaves to help with the harvest—it also mentions the involvement of many Founding Fathers within the institution of slavery, a historical detail upon which many twentieth-century historical accounts failed to shed light. Even as historians painted a portrait of Thomas Jefferson as a “benevolent slaveholder” in later years, many accounts of his brutality were reworked by biographers and textbook authors as “charming plantation tales” (Wienczek). Indeed, circumstances regarding the evidence of Jefferson's inhumane treatment of his slaves make an excellent case for the necessity of such DLs as American Memory and the NDLP, since a letter reporting the beatings of Jefferson's slaves at the nail forge was purposefully hidden in the 1950s by historian Edwin Betts, doomed to stay hidden from public sight until its release as late as 2005 (Wienczek). Thus, *Slavery* gives a new perspective on both the slaves and the slaveowners involved in the system, making important changes to the traditional historiography of the slave trade.

Comparing the implications of “Washington” and “Slavery—Crash Course U.S. History #13”

Slavery, like *Washington*, challenges the public images of such hallowed white male heroes as the Founding Fathers, doing so with information that was often obscured or minimized by academics and historians of the twentieth century. As *Washington* directly ridicules the men who have since been the subjects of great veneration in American culture, *Slavery* emphasizes the heroic qualities of a group that did not have white privilege on its side. *Washington*

challenges the spots in the American pantheon occupied by deified, exaggerated heroes, while *Slavery* creates more space in that pantheon for less traditional yet equally important American heroes, such as Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner. The viewpoints presented by each video provide contrast to the conservative and Eurocentric lessons of mainstream U.S. history that were upheld by the Senate in 1995. Thus, the historians of YouTube invited the American public to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its nation's history and patriotic trends by creating informative, entertaining and modern resources from the perspectives of those other than powerful white men throughout the centuries.

Manifested changes to American attitudes towards U.S. history and its heroes

The American-history DLs of the 1990s and the YouTube history videos of the late 2000s both served a common purpose: to challenge the biased accounts of American history that drowned out multicultural and politically-correct perspectives. As increasing numbers of Americans gained access to these resources throughout and beyond the two decades, the manifestation of changes to American attitudes towards the nation's history became apparent. Over the span of two decades, three significant polls reflected a shift in the stance of the American public towards its most traditionally revered presidents.

Consider the wide gap in opinion between historians and the public on the subject of George Washington's legacy as one of the most influential and beloved founders. As early as 1996, a Schlesinger poll of historians revealed that George Washington was considered to be one of three presidents with the maximum ranking of "Great," rating just behind Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Watson 5). In a 2000 poll of historians conducted by C-SPAN, the

historians participating in the survey rated Washington as history's second-best president, the same ranking he would receive from the historians participating in C-SPAN's second survey in 2009 (The Washington Times). Thus, in a period of over a decade, the general opinion of historians remained relatively static in regard to one of the nation's most traditionally beloved and venerated presidents.

The records of the public opinion tell a different story. An ABC News.com poll in 2000, surveying 1,012 adults nationwide with the question, "Who do you think was the greatest American president?", found that Washington ranked in not second but fifth place, with only 8% of the public's votes—behind, respectively, Lincoln, Kennedy, F. D. Roosevelt, and Reagan ("Presidents and History"). He moved down to seventh place in 2005, when Washington College conducted its own poll of the public opinion, asking to name the greatest president (Kast). Discussing the results of this study, which he helped to facilitate, Washington College professor Ted Widmer concluded that traditionally, Washington has been over-emphasized in classrooms, leading to a "burn-out" in public interest—in his words, the survey shows that people have "rebelled a little bit" against this convention, and consequently, Washington's popularity has taken a drop (Kast).

What to make of all this? As many historians had long enjoyed access to the collections of research libraries in various universities and institutions, the advent of a digital library of historical accounts and primary sources did not significantly change the attitudes of many prominent researchers, especially when those DLs were primarily begun as projects to educate new generations of learners. As in the case of the aforementioned Edwin Betts, the historian and researcher who chose to hide the evidence incriminating Thomas Jefferson for the abuse of

young slave boys, historians and researchers had long enjoyed a level of control over historical information and its circulation, as they were often the sole parties with access to such information and were therefore tasked with its distribution within mainstream culture. Having its access to historical resources mainly limited to these biased portrayals of heroes venerated by an academic elite, the American public, as Ted Widmer noted, grew tired of this homogeneous selection. As the DLs of the Library of Congress (and, in future years, the DPLA) provided access to the stories of a more diverse range of Americans, these stories grew increasingly widespread; based upon the numbers that we see above, the status quo of valuing the mythicized father figure and discarding his status as slave owner became less acceptable in the opinions of a generation that owed its liberal education in part to the programs of the Internet.

These liberal trends continue. Pop-culture sensation *Hamilton*, the Broadway musical that captured the public's attention, has done no small feat by successfully drawing the public eye once more to the stories of the nation's founders. However, the great triumph of this act is not so surprising, given the nature of the musical at hand. By featuring a racially-diverse cast and a score rife with rap, R&B, and the modern vernacular, *Hamilton's* creator sought to "eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and this story," widening the scope of the musical's message beyond the academic perspective (Delman). The musical also places a spotlight on a less well-known Founding Father—one who, the audience learns, was an immigrant, a self-made man, a hard worker, and, above all, a human. This account does not shy away from Hamilton's immigrant status and underprivileged beginnings in the West Indies, just as it addresses his adulterous affair and unpopularity among several of his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention; it also honors a man who befriended abolitionists, spoke out against

tyranny, and, unlike many of the privileged Founding Fathers, began his time in America as a penniless teenager, only to work his way up to a position of wealth, power, and prestige (Diggs et al.). Hamilton's story, as portrayed for modern audiences, is one of struggle and perseverance, a story with which the average American could easily identify. Thus, as social media spreads the popularity of a more humanized Founding Father, the United States continues to learn a lesson in patriotism: in the modern age, where the voice of the people speaks from the powerful digital platform of social media, the greatest and most-admired heroes will be those with whom the greater American public can finally empathize.

Conclusion

By disseminating a more inclusive series of narratives within U.S. history, digital libraries and online pop-culture platforms have enjoyed great success in changing the perspectives of their users. As the online community continues to grow in size and diversity, it has become increasingly necessary that such a community has access to an equally varied database of resources that meets its needs. The digital libraries of the early 1990s proved the importance of involving new perspectives within American history education, especially as these efforts were met with backlash within the system of education reforms; in the following decade, YouTube users went on to use new information to evaluate and criticize the flawed presentation of American history in a way that would appeal to the public at large, involving modern entertainment methods to make a point and spread a message worldwide. Overall, these efforts proved to influence modern conceptions of American history and patriotism, as shown by Washington's gradual loss of favor and *Hamilton's* wildly-popular celebration of America's

inherent multiculturalism and spirit of perseverance. Thus, the modern historical discussion within the United States has grown to include the stories of new American heroes, de-emphasizing the importance of masculinity and including people of all races and genders within the modern pantheon of patriots—effectively creating a better representation of the goals and perspectives of a new generation of historians.

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