

Segments of a Historically Political Existence: (The Cotton Diaries and Gumby  
Scrapbooks)

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### Abstract

Charles T. Cotton wrote in 15 pocketbook diaries that displaying his thoughts and an account of the political situation in Washington D. C. during the Civil War from 1850 to 1877. Alexander Gumby (a virtually unknown aspiring artist whom at one point took a job as a waiter at Columbia University in New York City) created a collection of over 138 scrapbooks documenting pivotal movements and figures in African American history from 1900 to 1960. Through an exploration of memory discourse from Maurice Halbwachs, Susan Crane, and Alon Confino, and how it applies to abstract themes in democracy, I will argue that the narrative accounts seen in scrapbooks and pocketbook diaries provide for an inclusive narrative that allows the reader to inscribe herself into the collectivity of narratives within both texts. The practice of keeping both objects invites and contains the potential to archive how poor populations historicize life in the American body politic.

### Segments of a Historically Political Existence: (The Cotton Diaries and Gumby Scrapbooks)

When a narrative is preserved detailing a person's entire life span in a diary or a scrapbook, the act of keeping either texts is a repetitive practice that contains a longing to preserve or create the history of one's life. The reader, discovering someone else's life in these texts, finds sequences of repetitive acts that repudiate time or the actions and lessons within a specific time frame. These repetitive acts ultimately practice a type of existence. The Charles T. Cotton diaries and the Alexander Gumby scrapbooks are structured representations of a collective history that are currently housed in the Columbia University Rare Books Library. Both objects narrate specific scenes in everyday life, and contain a yearning to historicize certain national issues or a specific existence that accounts for a longing to be apart of the American body politic. The literal act of keeping a diary or collecting memorabilia about the political life of a nation in a scrapbook is a repetitive act that entitles the author to participate in the history of the democratic dialogue of a nation.

Cotton was neither a dignitary nor a socialite, and did not have the pedigree that would allow him access into aristocratic venues. He spent a part of his life as a teacher and eventually recorded experiences that pertained to the political condition of the nation during the Civil War in several pocketbook diaries. His 15 pocketbook diaries (which were created between 1850 and 1877) contain Cotton's personal thoughts, budgeting lists, and lists of subjects he taught his pupils. The diaries also contain obscure witty references about scenes in his everyday life that bridge his personal memories with a collective memory. He was a school teacher in Natchez, Mississippi in the early 1850's, traveled to New Orleans and New York City, and eventually made his way to

Washington D.C., where he became a federal clerk. The size of his diaries are around three inches wide and four inches tall, come in a variety of colors from brown to red, and are bound by a leather binding.

Gumby was a middle class black man who was born in Maryland in 1885, and spent most of his adult life in New York City up until his death in 1960. In 1902, he became a law student at Dover State College in Delaware, eventually dropped out of school, and moved to New York City where he took several odd jobs like becoming a waiter at Columbia University. Throughout his life in New York City, he produced 138 scrapbooks on black history, multiple scrapbooks on his life, and gained funding from several of his wealthy friends to open a studio on 2144 Fifth Avenue between 131st and 132nd St. in Harlem. From archiving articles, pictures, or rare manuscripts on Josephine Baker or on lynching and race riots, each scrapbook is meticulously structured with articles and memorabilia that are dated to show the reader a progression of time.

When looking at the diaries and the scrapbooks, the reader discovers that the collection of texts in both objects build an imaginary that longs to be recognized. The act of creating a diary or a scrapbook represents the will to construct or support an understanding of existence that must be documented, restructured, and is designed to be mutable so that the meaning within the text has a long narrative existence. The language in the Cotton diaries suggests that a life well lived is one that must be documented. The pocketbook diaries are a manifestation of Cotton's will to construct the progression of his form of self-determination with the concept of the death of his memory in mind. For Gumby, the act of documenting a scene in history is a matter of collecting multiple artifacts that prolong the life of a specific social issue. Both objects re-envision and

interpret the American political and cultural landscape through the act of archiving accounts that are specific to a person or a historical event.

Aside from interpreting both objects as an alternative history, the Cotton diaries and Gumby scrapbooks contain a collective memory told by an individual. Both objects communicate the will to remember in the face of the immanent deterioration of memory mirroring the encroaching feeling of life marching toward death. Once the author of the diary or the scrapbook begins to communicate an intent through the archiving of articles or the act of writing in a diary, both acts become a public document that details a collective memory belonging to the social political world. In other words, the act of choosing to communicate thoughts through the very materialism of a diary or a scrapbook is a choice that makes one's words public.

The language in both the Gumby and Cotton books represent specific themes that are reiterated by the plurality of concepts integrated into both objects mirroring American democratic sentiments. One can locate these themes in a correspondence between James Madison and Thomas Jefferson about how to go about instituting laws surrounding public debt in America. In a letter written to James Madison by Thomas Jefferson (1999) on September 6, 1789 in Paris, Jefferson writes about the nature of how one generation is indebted to the next generation. Through a generational argument that constructs the passing over of debt from one generation to the next depending on age, Jefferson mentions that because the 'earth belongs to the living' it is only natural that the future generation repeal the laws that prior generations produce (pg. 596). Jefferson understands that citizens of a democracy have the power to extinguish the laws of previous generations. He goes on to mention that citizens in a democracy are fickle and

will endlessly use the power to repeal laws that provide the permanence of existing debt from one generation to another. Jefferson (1999) goes on to favor a law that institutes a 'limited duration of debt' instead of one that 'needs a repeal' (pg. 597).

In a letter to Jefferson written on February 4, 1790 in New York, Madison disagrees with Jefferson's lack of trust in the American public and his opposition to the option of repealing a law surrounding debt. Madison (1999) goes on to argue that when future generations revise governmental laws the laws that inherit 'prejudices' from older forms of government (like the British aristocracy) become 'mutable', and this kind of revision 'aids a government towards an enlightened age' (pg. 606). For Madison (1999), this act of repeal (which comes from the people) is an act that frees one generation from debt. This is seen when he writes that "debt can be incurred for the benefit of the unborn and repel future generations from conquests and future evils" (pg. 607). Madison also gives the demos the right to construct the rules that govern their everyday life. At the end of his letter, Madison rejects Jefferson's attempt at placing a numerical theory on a subject that should be handled by governmental institutions. While Jefferson conveys that there should be a law that leaves future generations accountable for the debt of previous generations, Madison clearly believes that this type of law should be repealed to fit the political aims of the current generation. In the midst of thinking about what needs to be instituted in an emerging democratic nation, Jefferson is ultimately arguing that laws should be instituted with the past in mind and Madison (in recognizing the prejudices that belong to the past) must repudiate the contexts of old political regimes in order to make way for a constitutional democracy. His democratic sentiments ultimately give the demos a level of political entitlement, and the right to interpret laws.

From Madison's understanding of democracy, in which old political prejudices can be repudiated by modern citizens, towards an understanding of democracy beyond the nation state, it is important to further identify the possibilities created by a form of government that has many forms. Interestingly enough, the concept of democracy can be an economic ideology, way of being, and even a suspended state in constant repeal. For Derrida, the word democracy is simply a state that never fully comes into being. His phrase 'democracy to come' epitomizes a deconstructive move in which democracy is a position that fights for human rights as an “alibi that tolerates the suffering, is an incalculable singularity and calculable equality, and is an empty name” (Derrida, 2005, pg. 86). In the midst of all of these contradictions, which further enforce his concept of auto-immunity, he goes on to say that democracy allows everyone who lives in such a state “the right to criticize everything publicly” (pg. 87). If one locates the democratic promise of human rights coupled with American economic interests, the concept of democracy in the present is shrouded with a neoliberal tinge that creates a domestic and global reflexive economic structure equating equality with the buying of consumer products.

As Inderpal Grewal (2005) argues, “America was so important to people all over the world because its power allowed for the dissemination of the promise of the democratic nation state and belonging through consumer practices” (pg.2). For Grewal, the advantages given to those who immigrated into the U.S. to fulfill the democratic promise were lacking in comparison to the types of advantages given to whites. Grewal argues that the highly skilled middle class Indians recruited to work in U.S. technology corporations were given lesser pay, and also had a hand in perpetuating the 'democratic

promise' by recruiting other Indians to work in American Corporations. As seen in Grewal's concept, the democratic promise coupled with a neo-liberalistic version of capitalism is purposefully evasive, and is as polymorphous as Derrida's definition of democracy. In comparing Athenian democracy vs. modern democracy, Sheldon S. Wolin (1994) takes up the ancient definition of democracy as “unstable, anarchical, and resistant to rationalizing forms of power or constitutions” (pg. 37). He goes on to argue that democracy is the “idea and practice of rational disorganization” and is “formless” (37, 50).

Wolin relocates this type of practice by reminding the reader that the demos in Athens understood democracy to be participatory, and a form of practice that lends itself to potential disorder. He also goes on to say that the 'hostile' discourse towards democracy is contingent upon focusing on the demos vs. the the political structure, is about the 'abuse of power', and in the American context contains a process of renewal based on forming new cultural patterns of commonality” (pg. 56-58). With that said, this longing to experience the democratic promise of restoration and to participate in the process of the political is often archived by the demos.

The potential for the revising and restoration in a state termed 'democracy to come' is seen in the practice of keeping a scrapbook or a diary as a repetitive performative act that places the demos back into the political. The language in the Cotton diaries perform this task by linking Cotton's narrative to a national history that seeks to radically break from the institution of slavery. Cotton's daily language, specifically on the Civil War, is his way of practicing a dialogue that allows him to fully build and understand his position in the body politic. The Gumby scrapbook on lynching and race riots becomes a history of



the internal political conflict produced by acts of lynching. The scrapbook literally maps out and archives articles explaining how the U.S. treats the passing of an anti-lynching law with the hope that the 'evils' surrounding lynching do not reoccur in the next generation. In understanding the politics surrounding lynching, Gumby takes it upon himself to construct and edit a scrapbook detailing the history of lynching in America. The mediums that both authors use simultaneously represent the past and the present as a way to talk about a social political history.

This type of revisionist longing is not isolated from power struggles, and cannot exist solely on the theoretical ruminations that belong to political theory. Instead, both texts produce a reflexive dialogue that embodies the concept of democracy as an idea that requires one to participate in a dialogue on the ever changing structures of democracy. Gumby and Cotton's relationship to democracy is one that is active and their participation comes in the form of repetitive acts that document their opinions or relationship with politics. For the reader discovering both author's archives, she discovers that these artifacts contain a specific story about the history of politics, and is a history onto itself that is a product or a form of memory that allows for the recognition of other forms of memory. This form of recognition has the power to validate an entire population's existence giving the reader an understanding that different populations may have different relationships to politics. In discussing both mediums as a venue for history, both objects contain a specific consumer lineage.

Pocketbook diaries were manufactured with the common record-keeping clerk in mind. The pocketbook diaries that Cotton uses contain a specific cultural message, material production, and history that informs the reader exactly how a person using a

pocketbook diary in the 1800's would consider important information. In the essay "A Pocketful of Days: Pocket Diaries and Daily Record Keeping among 19<sup>th</sup> century New England Women" by Molly McCarthy (2000), McCarthy notes that the usage of pocketbook diaries connotes the marriage of consumer values and necessity orchestrated by the boom in the American publishing industry in the 1800's. She expresses that:

1. The popularity in the selling of pocketbook diaries can be traced as early as the 1850's, and was a product that combined elements of paper found in stationaries with almanacs which were popular products sold to the American public in as early as 1830.
2. Pocketbook diaries were manufactured for a 'well educated and middle or upper middle class population, and used for keeping track of the 'calendar, rates of postage, cash accounts, business expenses, and a writer's thoughts about the weather or family visitations.
3. The diaries were not used with the intent of summarizing one's emotional state of mind on a daily basis. This type of introspective writing occurred during the late 1800's in America, and was inspired by the French practice of the 'journal in time tradition'.

(pg. 275-277, 284)

These diaries allowed a person to construct a rational, didactic, and routine like representation of the self. Each small diary divides a person's diary entry into three daily entries marked by three boxes for each page. The limited spaces for text in each page conveys to the writer that it is better to didactically parse out unneeded pieces of knowledge and organize your finances or thoughts like an accountant recording his most important life necessities. For the 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class consumer, writing a long emotional tirade would have been shameful, and keeping account of daily necessities was the norm. Irina Paperno (2004), in her essay "What Can be Done with Diaries?", argues that diaries can be used as a 'central cultural practice' that forces the scholar to simultaneously deal with the form, context, and individual subject within the diary (pg.

573). The Cotton diaries may fall under a rigid and didactic narrative of daily activities, but it is the meaning contained in the narrative of the diary that brings the idea of Charles T. Cotton to life.

While opening the first of his fifteen diaries, the first page contains a signature of his name, his location, which is Natchez, Mississippi, and the date, which is January 1, 1850. The diary contains a calendar, the manufacturer listed in the diary is David Felt & Co., and each page is normatively divided up into three different boxes for each day. The segmented language in his miniature pocket diaries suggests that he used the diaries to document routine daily tasks, his experiences living in different places, and important events in his life. At different periods of time, Cotton will either write sporadically or routinely in his diary. For the most part, his diaries are written in pencil, and for specific information he uses pen. At times, Cotton writes in quick fragments that function like a stream of consciousness containing specific tasks or ideas. The first several entries in his first diary are a log of letters he either receives or writes to other people:

Jan. 1<sup>st</sup> – Letters from Gorham  
Jan. 4 – Letters to Aunt Sally  
Jan. 5 – Letter to Aunt G. Mailed

(Cotton, 1850 Diary)

As a result of the limited space given to each day of the year in his diary, the short remarks above are an indication that he uses these limited spaces to jot down important actions that he might forget. On Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, it is clear that Cotton was keeping an account of the letters he received in order to account for letters he must send to specific people. Cotton not only accounts for the letters he receives, but he also accounts for how the weather or the temperature of a room makes him feel:

May 6 - Fire Comfortable  
May 7 - Fire Comfortable  
May 8 - Cool and Cloudy until about 6  
o'clock P.M. when it became  
balmy, clear, and delightful.

(Cotton, 1850 Diary)

In giving importance to the weather in relationship to the level of glee and comfort he may feel at that point in time, Cotton documents the weather so that he can remember how he felt on a specific day. If every piece of information jotted in a diary is a record of the existence of moments in his life, Cotton jots down simple everyday occurrences with the understanding that documenting the weather on a particular day might help him recollect other events that are specific to that day.

As a teacher in Natchez, Mississippi in 1850, he makes sure to note which books he purchases, which scholars to read, and which students of his have commenced:

Jan. 7 - Commenced school again on pine ridge after a 2  
week vacation. Resent 13 scholars.  
Jan. 12 - Cicero at 1.50  
Jan. 15 - McCullany Commencement- Study of Latin in  
Andrews – Finish Lessons  
Jan. 18 - Two Boys Commenced- Roman History.  
Jan. 21 - Garrett entered school – Commenced  
reading Virgil IV book. - Zenophon 1<sup>st</sup>  
book. - Legendre IV book.

(Cotton, 1850 Diary)

Cotton studied Latin, read Cicero, studied Roman history, and possibly imbued all of his students with the same classical tradition. The segment above clearly shows that Cotton's personality upheld classical rational thought and his diaries are a manifestation of that type of orderly thinking. At this point in his diary, he lets the reader know that the most important virtues to him are a life of knowledge, and keeping track of how much certain

objects cost as represented by the cost next to the word Cicero. He jots down the names of students to account for how many of them have commenced or attended class.

For the reader looking at his text, Cotton's mention of classical text, finances, and students color his first diary. For most diarists, the act of writing is a form of “mediation between the public and private world” (Paperno, 2004, pg. 572). What is rare in his text, are his small mentions of tragic moments, or annoyances. These types of specific instances are mentioned three times in the first diary:

July 26 - The most mournful and melancholy decease of my dearest friend. “Oh Heaven help my grief”.

Nov. 24 - Spit blood this morning. Never did this before.

Nov. 26 - Mr. Galel's Sons left school, in a pert. Mr. Galel must be a good spirited man at the cost of his good sense

(Cotton, 1850 Diary)

While the mention of death occurs infrequently in his diaries, the mention of death and his personal grief disrupts the linear order of multiple mentions of classical texts and students. The mention of death seems to have absolutely no place in his orderly diary. For the reader, this mention of death disrupts Cotton's overall representation of an orderly life and adds another layer to the course of his life in these diaries. The mention of him spitting out blood also reads like an anomaly, and one can only assume that his annoyance toward Mr. Galel's sons comes from his overall negative disposition throughout that week.

In many of his diaries, there is a universal trope that he deploys to reference, sum up, or remind him of topics that he should research for the following year. At the end of the 1850 diary he writes:

(for 1851) - Subject of thought V.C. Mystery & Reason Compatible  
Higher Laws Consciousness Proof of a Divinity in the overwhelming and  
destructive nature of injustice, & wrong

(Cotton, 1850 Diary)

Despite the mention of his interest in a divinity that exists in the face of 'injustice', the mention of the themes 'mystery and reason being compatible' is astonishing because his diary conveys to the reader that he is fixated on an orderly life recorded in a structured pocketbook diary. For Cotton, this so called divinity in the form of a 'higher law', is both unknown and logical. Although the diary is literally constructed in an orderly manner, Cotton does not write in his diary on a regular basis, and the topic he normatively focuses on relate to his profession as a teacher. As for how the modern reader interprets the passage above, the unknown force or divinity that Cotton mentions could very well represent the blank pages of his diary. The language in Cotton's pocket book diaries not only 'mediate' between the political and historical ruminations in the public/ private world, but combines these sentiments producing a language that belongs to the public world. When Cotton mentions wanting to explore the discourse of philosophical morality, he is mapping the course of the New Year and inviting generations to read the next chapter of his life.

The scrapbook, like the pocketbook diary, was constructed with the understanding that the object would be shared in a public realm, and often looks like a collage of important memorabilia from special events in a person's life. In *Scrapbooks: An American History*, Jessica Helfand (2008) writes that the modern day scrapbook originated in the Renaissance with the practice of keeping a 'common place book' (pg. xviii). This commonplace book allows a person to inscribe biblical quotations to an already written

text further adding meaning to a specific narrative. As Helfand mentions, the introduction of a prototype of the modern scrapbook arrived when a man by the name of James Granger, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, coupled his historical descriptions of the history of England with maps and other forms of illustration further inscribing meaning to the text. The practice that he introduced allowed for others to begin including maps of towns, and personal artifacts to different texts. With access to photography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the availability of colored prints, the traditional scrapbooks would take form allowing the typical middle class home to archive objects pertaining to special scenes of familial events. Helfand also mentions that by the late 1800's, even Mark Twain began to sell his own version of the scrapbook, and by the 1900's fifty different types of his scrapbooks were sold to the general public further reinforcing the popularity of the practice (pg. xviii).

Gumby's autobiographical scrapbooks contain letters, poetry and pictures, get well cards, and cartoons from other people. His four autobiographical scrapbooks, with its barrage of letters and pictures, tell the story of his life. The get-well cards and other objects in his scrapbooks produce Gumby's historical narrative, and becomes a collective memory that aligns his existence with the body politic. Each scrapbook can take the shape of a picture album or can be as big as an old Renaissance bible. The scrapbooks are bound with either a heavy plastic, metal, or cardboard cover. There are no page numbers in his scrapbooks, and the linear progression of time comes in the form of dated letters that represent either each day or month. From the modern reader's perspective, each of his four autobiographical scrapbooks represent a time in his life, and artifacts in the scrapbooks give the reader a tactile view of his existence.

In scrapbook 3, Box 21, he gains publicity and exhibits his work in the Negro Achievement Week exhibit as seen in the collected publicity posters in the scrapbook. By the time the reader gets to scrapbook 4, Box 22, he loses his studio, gets pneumonia on March 11, 1931, and stays in the hospital for 3 years. The reader is clued into this specific part of his life when she sees the discharged hospital letter addressed to Gumby, the get well letters that he conveniently archives into his scrapbook, and the pictures of Gumby inhabiting a hospital. Interestingly enough, by the time one gets to scrapbook 5 in Box 23 and scrapbook 6 in Box 24 (which is representative of his life in the 1940's and 50's) Gumby donates his entire scrapbook collection to Columbia University and an artist creates a bust of his head which currently sits in the Columbia University Rare Books Library. These two scenes are represented by photographs of him working to archive his collection at Butler Library, and other photographs taken of him while posing for his bust.

In scrapbook 3, Box 21, one of the first poems Gumby archives is entitled "Regular Man" and the last line says:

They'll say, " Well, he was a Regular Man."  
And drops a Regular Tear -- Selected.

(Gumby, Box 21)

Many of the letters and scenes he chose to depict in his scrapbooks were about how much he loved his life, how passionate he was about uplifting black intellectual scholarship, and how he was loved by his friends. The irony surrounding the passage above is that Gumby did not lead a regular life. The pages of his scrapbooks become a collective understanding of his identity that asks the reader to scan through multiple representations of his personal history.



Eckhard Kuhn-Osius (1981) argues, in his essay “Making Loose Ends Meet: Private Journals in the Public Realm”, that the mere gesture of 'naming an experience drags' the language into the public or social world (pg. 170). Both the Cotton diaries and the Gumby scrapbooks hold a specific account of a collective history and memory. When one talks about forms of memory, it is important to see how the idea of collective memory produced by Maurice Halbwachs, Susan Crane, and Alon Confino has colored the discourse on memory studies. For Halbwachs (1992), the founder of the term 'collective memory', individual memory is really a product of a 'social world' (pg. 38). She terms this concept as collective memory because the act of recalling memory is aided by a public social world of connective memory. The very materialism in both the Cotton diaries and the Gumby scrapbooks is inspired by a collision of political and social memories creating forms of history.

While Halbwachs was writing in the 1940's and focusing on the memories constructed by the European elite, Confino and Crane (both writing in the late 90's) take up the idea of 'collective memory' in order to neutralize the preference given to the concept of history vs. it's so called competing other in the form of 'memory'. For Crane (1997), her ownership of memory discourse is linked to the emergence of how historical consciousness becomes the intermediary that links themes like historical and collective memory together (pg. 1373). Crane argues that historical consciousness already contains a desire to think historically. The language seen in both the Gumby and Cotton objects contain a longing to historicize a specific condition through the act of dating thoughts and objects to represent the progression of time. Crane argues that “all narratives, all sites, all

texts remain objects until they are "read" or referred to by individuals thinking historically through lived experiences" (pg. 1381).

Confino (1997) goes on to express that the use of memory illuminates the cultural history of the present and the past. Instead of redirecting the use of memory towards an individual body that has a sense of historical consciousness, he sees forms of memory as an "outcome of relationships between a representation of the past and a spectrum of symbolic representations available in a culture" (pg.1391). For Confino, one can analyze the specific 'embedded cultural practices' within both objects while simultaneously placing them within a 'global historical context' and a 'global symbolic universe' (pg. 1391). Both objects are a representation of a specific kind of collective memory, and become intertwined with other memories within multiple cultures in society. In seeing the usage of memory as a double articulation of given symbolism that lends itself to the culture of a given society, Confino hopes to discover other forms of memory that are connected to all sorts of social and political symbolism. The Cotton diaries and Gumby scrapbooks are a form of history that contain a double articulation of the past and the present ignited by the opportunity to participate in the democratic body politic.

In analyzing how both objects attach themselves to democratic politics as a form of practice seen in keeping a diary or a scrapbook, one can then begin to think about the relevance of how accounts of memory can open up the field of political discourse. By 1863, Cotton is living in Washington D.C. as a government clerk and the text in his diary suggest that he is witnessing a political history in the making. The diaries he produced in the 1860's represent an individual interested in commenting on daily affairs, which means

that he saw himself as a part of the body politic. One would go as far as to argue that Cotton is cognizant of his journals being produced in a time of great national turmoil.

If Cotton sees himself as having a historical consciousness and transmits this consciousness on to paper, then the diaries produced between 1863 and 1865 detail his fascination with current events as they meld into his personal life. Once the reader stumbles upon Cotton's language, she finds out that Cotton was right in the midst of Lincoln's cabinet, and his language frames how he feels about witnessing the creation of a national history:

July 26 - Visits today in East Room, White House, Francis B. Carpenter Great Picture just completed, "President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation before the Cabinet," Chase, Stanton, Sewing, Bates, Smith & Blair. Beautiful Day.

August 4 - First day by appointment of Pres. Lincoln acarring to Resolution of Congress – A very beautiful day.

(Cotton, 1863 Diary)

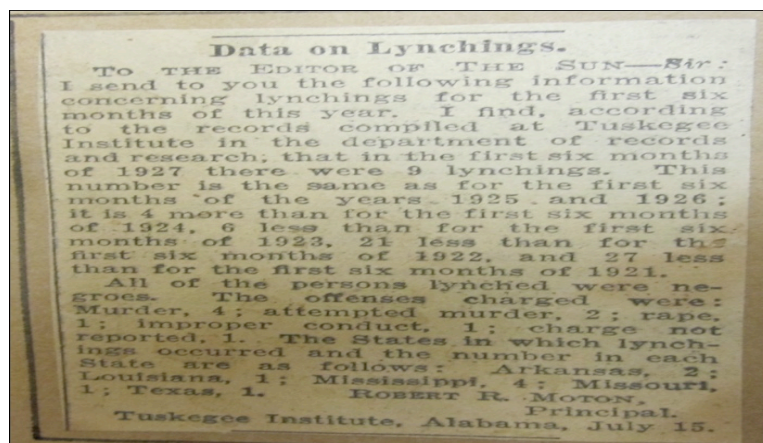
Cotton witnesses the completion of Carpenter's portrait, President Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" being recited in front of his cabinet, and jots down the people in Lincoln's inner circle. He conveys to the reader that he along with the politicians around him are experiencing and living out a specific political historical memory. Interestingly enough, Cotton also associates beautiful weather with occurrences that have an immense amount of historical meaning. The language in the Cotton diaries becomes a cultural narrative detailing a specific national history in the 1860's diaries. With that said, on the last day of 1864 Cotton writes:

December 31 - Farewell old year, full of sorrow to so many, syeth blessing in joys to many.

(Cotton, 1864 Diary).

The memory revolving around the passage above sums up the political history of a year engulfed with the Civil War. From the level of pride Cotton expresses while being around Lincoln's cabinet, to his ruminations about injustice seen in his 1850 diary, Cotton is literally archiving a personal life interested in the democratic promise of waging war against the “destructive nature of injustice” (Cotton, 1850 Diary).

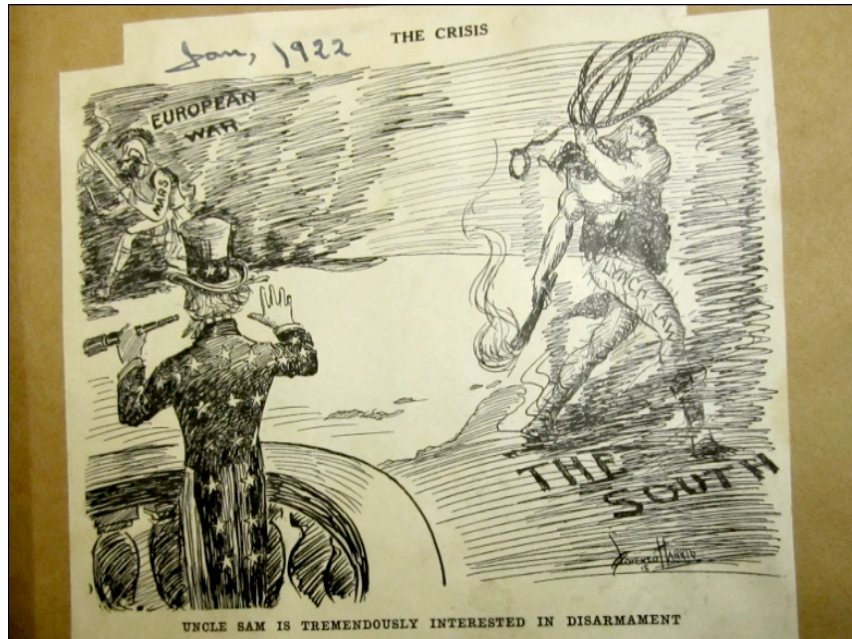
In a vol. 1 of the Gumby scrapbooks on lynching and race riots in Flat Box 146, the book opens up with a *NY Times* article dated Sept. 18, 1851 and next to it there is another *Times* article dated one hundred years later in Sept 18, 1951. The earlier article talks about a fugitive slave riot in Lancaster Co., PA, and the latter talks about 1951 being the greatest 'American Century' or a time in which slavery has been purged. The next several pages of the scrapbook contain documents about lynching from 1918 up to the 1930's. The entire scrapbook is made up of cartoons and articles. Gumby includes an article on how many people were lynched by the Tuskegee Institute:



(Gumby, Volume 1, Flat Book 146)

This article details accounts of lynching within a six month period, compares the statistics to different periods of time, and also makes mention of what types of charges

brought about lynching. In order to talk about the political turmoil produced by lynching occurring in the South, he also inserts illustrations or cartoons into his scrapbook:



(Gumby, Volume 1, Flat Book 146)

This illustration depicts Uncle Sam, representative of the U.S., trying to mediate between WWI and the crime of lynching in the South. Throughout the scrapbook the article mentioning an anti-lynching bill is archived and tells the story of how the bill is never passed due to how Congress strategically stalled the bill. Through the many mentions of U.S. Presidents, specifically Wilson, calling lynching a national tragedy, Gumby makes sure to depict how Wilson yokes the tragedy of lynching as a crime against patriotism instead of a crime specific to blacks. By depicting an article about the lynching of two Filipinos who were working as migrant workers in Southern California, he is making a conscious decision to talk about how the dynamic of class oppression instigates violence. The Gumby scrapbook on lynching and race riots

intentionally contains articles that inscribe a global and domestic context to the occurrence of lynching in the U.S. His scrapbook also provides a history documenting shifts in governmental opinion, which strikingly mimics the contradictory formlessness attributed to the dialogue pertaining to how democracy functions.

The tactile perspective that both Cotton and Gumby express embody a radical break from a normative concept of narrative history, and this sentiment is embedded in the revisionist, indecisive, and contradictory nature of the American body politic. The tactile feeling that one gets from both objects, and the visual representations that both objects contain also construct a living history in the hope of creating the possibility that a future living population will take up the responsibility of making the history of the body politic mutable. Cotton's usage of the 15 pocketbook diaries, which spanned fifteen years, and Gumby's volumes of scrapbooks containing the tedious archiving of multiple pieces of memorabilia, becomes a repetitive performance with the hope that both mentions of history repudiate future tragedies. The value in both texts comes from recognizing that both objects exist in two different cultures, but are connected because both texts contain a longing to be recognized as a history that documents the political. Both objects interpret the revisionist democratic tradition allowing for other groups that do not have the privilege of gaining the resources of an academic institution a venue to construct a specific relationship with the political.

For Cotton and Gumby, the act of historically accounting for their daily lives or the events they witness is a manifestation of the longing to document their participation in the American body politic. The task of the reader is to learn how groups lacking certain opportunities to express their condition use forms of expression that are afforded to them. Gumby and Cotton had access to commonplace books that were marketed to the middle class, but what about populations of people who long to be represented in the annals of

history and do not have the ability to use normative linguistic conventions that belong to middle class culture? In a memoir documented by Theodore Rosengarten (1974) entitled *All God's Danger: The Life of Nate Shaw*, Nate Shaw (an illiterate black man growing up in the Jim Crow ridden South) experiences how whites tricked blacks into voting for candidates not interested in equal rights for blacks and says:

Anyway they (whites trying to keep blacks from voting in the South) could deprive a Negro was a celebration to em. "We going to pull the thing our way." They didn't definitely tell them (Blacks) – I was watchin and listen. As the years come and go it leaves me with a better understandin of history.

(pg. 36)

The act of developing a historical political consciousness and being aware of a history of inequalities, is not specific to a dominant institution or class. Nate Shaw, like the utterances of the Cotton or Gumby texts, contains a language detailing history in an extraordinarily different way. Nate Shaw (being illiterate) communicates his history orally creating the possibility for modern readers to conceptualize his story in a different context. Shaw is constantly telling his story with the hope that the person who is listening to him will understand that the American landscape begs for an awareness that the history of politics contains a plurality of perspectives in mind.

From this understanding, one recognizes that each group has a longing to be a part of history through the modes of communication that are available to them. This sense of longing comes from wanting to preserve an existence that is specific to a group. It is through this understanding that one can hope that the next institutionalized form of communication does not mimic the tragedies that come from ignoring the current gender, racial, and economic problems. The act of breathing life into diaries or scrapbooks through recognizing its embedded cultural nuances requires one to think historically and

politically as a radical act that repudiate aspects of the past. The task of political theory concerning the movements of democracy is to figure out how the demos relates to politics. In producing this task, the reader must always leave space for the possibility of different forms of communication even those forms that she may never formally understand.

#### Notes

The Charles T. Cotton 15 pocketbook diaries cited in this essay are unpublished and can be found at Columbia University's Rare Books Library. The Alexander Gumby Scrapbooks are also unpublished and all quotations and pictures come from the scrapbooks themselves and are also located in the Rare Books Library at Columbia University.

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