LEARNING HISTORY – UNLEARNING HISTORY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MY OWN HISTORY EDUCATION
I recently completed my student teaching in an AP US History classroom at Lincoln High School. Throughout my year in this classroom, I was regularly confronted with my own lack of knowledge in the very subject I was teaching. As someone who studied primarily medieval history in college, I quickly realized I did not have as firm of a grasp on US history as I had thought. What made this reality more intense was my attempt to grow as a culturally responsive and anti-racist teacher. Each time I was asked to design a lesson, I realized that much of the knowledge I did have felt outdated, overly-simplistic, and very white-washed. This got me reflecting on my own history education.

In high school, I had the same teacher for two years of Social Studies. I knew at the time that this teacher was conservative and had many opposing views to my own, but I was ignorant then of how this was impacting many students in his class, particularly students of color. Though this teacher and I debated most days in class, he respected me as a student, as history was my favorite subject and I was one of few students who was willing to actively participate in class. He actually wrote me a letter of recommendation - the first page of this project. Looking back, I can recognize in him the tendencies of an “elitist” teacher, as described by Zaretta Hammond: “Professional distance coupled with passive leniency creates the elitist, a teacher who sees dependent students of color as less intellectual and favors students whom he deems smart and more like him. He makes no effort to help dependent learners grow their intelligence” (2015).

Several years after I graduated, this teacher wrote an opinion piece for the local paper entitled: “A Diversity education is a divisive education.” This article forms the basis for the second page of the project. In this article, he argues against including diverse narratives in history. I realized in returning to this article that I was now teaching the same class I had taken from this teacher, and that the basis of my knowledge of US history was still from this experience. In addition to this, I realized that a letter of recommendation from this professor was likely one of many times my racial identity had unduly benefited me in the education system.

As mentioned earlier, I studied mostly medieval European history as an undergraduate. Looking back at my time at this university, I realized just how steeped in Euro-centrism my classes were. My transcript comprises the third page of this project. Whether the class was literature, art, philosophy, music, dance, or theology, all classes were Euro-centric. I had several individual professors who were fantastic, and turned classes that could have been horribly white-washed - The Age of the Crusades - into a critical analysis of religious and political conflict with remarkably balanced perspectives and sources. But as an institution, the college I chose was one whose curriculum was steeped in Euro-centrism and offered very few courses not centered on Europe or the US.

As a teacher who will soon be teaching either US History or World History, I still feel unprepared. Part of that is the realization that I am still in the same system that taught me a white-washed version of history. In fact, the very textbook I was supposed to use in my student teaching was the same textbook I read in my own APUSH classroom. This textbook’s introduction of Columbus makes up the final page of this project. Here again we see a version of history that glorifies the white man and minimizes the harm done to people of color in the name of advancing “Western Civilization.”

In a way, this project shows the arc of my journey as a history teacher. When my former teacher wrote that letter of recommendation, he knew I wanted to be a history teacher. I vividly remember reading his opinion piece half a decade later while in my first year of teaching abroad and the conflict this brought up in me. When applying to graduate programs, I couldn’t meet the requirements for non-western history at some schools due to my Euro-centric undergraduate years. When I started my student teaching in an APUSH classroom with the same textbook I had read from as a teenager, it felt that things had come full circle, and that I had a lot of learning to do. And this left me grappling with the central question of this dilemma: How do I overcome my own upbringing in the dominant, white-centered academic/historical setting in order to become an anti-racist and culturally responsive history teacher?

As you flip through this project, make sure to lift up each sheet of film to read the original document. I intentionally created these blackout poetry pieces so that the original documents could still be read in their entirety. To me, this demonstrates that I cannot ignore my past education - cannot erase it - but that I can learn from it. Each note card has a brief explanation of the document and a poignant quote that captures the learning I had in creating each piece. The poems - though not a great literary strength of mine - attempt to convey some of the things I have come to understand in my time in this program.