

5-Andrew Newman.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology and the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode, it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Andrew Newman. Andrew is an Associate Professor of English and History at Stony Brook University. I've asked him to begin by describing the document he's contributed to Hidden Literacies.

Andrew Newman [00:01:00] It's a 1849 petition from the Munsee Indians who at the time were living in Kansas or what is now Kansas on a Delaware Indian reservation. It's a petition that they sent to President Zachary Taylor. They're making a bunch of requests of the president and never actually got to the president, but they sent it his way. They were complaining that the Delawares weren't treating them well, that they had sold the land that the Munsees were living on. So the Munsees were asking for a tract of their own. They were complaining that they never got the annuities or payments from a treaty that they had been parties to in 1805 in Ohio. And they were also complaining that they never received compensation for land that they had sold in New York State right after the Revolutionary War. Finally, they traced a history that went all the way back to the first arrival of the Whites or the Dutch colonists in New York and their ancestral homeland. So back to the beginning of the 17th century.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:59] This memorial, which offers histories of various treaties and agreements with colonial and American governments, is important, in part because it demonstrates different kinds of literacies. One important influence on the document was the role John Newsom played as their scribe.

Andrew Newman [00:02:16] The Munsee memorial is important, particularly for this project, our Hidden Literacies project, because that exhibits different kinds of literacy. One of them is that it was actually written not by the Munsee Indians who signed it at the end, signed it with their X marks instead of with proper signatures. It was written by a friend of theirs, a Mahican Stockbridge Indian, John Newsom, who had been trained, educated at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. So he was in place as kind of their scribe. And in the presentation yesterday, I compared his role to that of the English scribes who wrote down Indian treaty documents or especially land deeds, which were considered as treaties, and whereas they were representing the voice of the Indians that they were writing for without the Indians really understanding what they were representing. You know, he as a real sort of friend and collaborator, was clearly working with them the whole time and representing them accurately.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:15] The influence of the Moravian church on the Munsees also influenced their literacies.

Andrew Newman [00:03:20] The Munsees themselves had been members of the Moravian church, and so they understood about literacy. They probably were readers

themselves and they weren't really shut out of the process in the way that they had been in colonial land deeds in earlier times, like in the 18th century.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:34] The Munsees wanted the American officials to whom they sent their memorial to find their account of their past dealings with English-speaking powers credible. Their memorial reminds his readers of the promises of the 1805 Treaty of Fort Industry, the 1757 Treaty of Easton, and stretches back to the early 17th century arrival of the Dutch. In this 1849 memorial request for previous treaties to be honored in terms of compensation and by requesting new lands to remove to, the Munsees draw on histories recorded on paper, oral histories and technologies more foreign to their White audiences, including wampum.

Andrew Newman [00:04:15] The content of the memorial exhibits different kinds of literacies or understandings of media that were important to their historical memory and their relations with the colonists. They talk about receiving a wampum belt at a treaty in eastern Pennsylvania in 1757, and they say they still have this belt with them. The way the belt worked was it was kind of like bringing out a contract from this earlier period saying, see, we made an agreement with you and you should be upholding it now. So the wampum is often compared to writing, but even more so than writing, it's kind of a symbol of an ongoing understanding and agreement that has to be rehearsed over and over again. For the Munsees, they felt that the English colonial government and even the Dutch colonial government before that in the region that was their ancestral homeland, was continuous with the United States government. So the relationship they had had with these colonial administrations now conferred an obligation on the United States government to help them out, you know, when they were in a period of need. So their historical memory was very important to their claim. They also present these oral traditions dating back to the early 17th century. And therefore, the validity of these traditions was also important to their present claim in 1849. They can say, because we remember what happened and because what happened was we treated you well in the 17th century. Now you should be helping us out.

Mary Mahoney [00:05:37] Andrew located the document in the National Archives but argues documents like this remain hidden because there's not the same respect for indigenous ways of knowing or ways of reading, such as the wampum belt.

Andrew Newman [00:05:53] This idea of respecting or not respecting different media, I call language ideologies or that's the term that I borrow from sociolinguistics. So value judgments about media, about written or spoken language, about indigenous media, such as wampum or, you know, there's other forms of indigenous media like the birch bark scrolls or Mesoamerican cultures, the pictographic writings in Peru, the keepu or these braided cords. The thing about wampum is that it also functions differently than your American writing. It's impossible to have for one person to have meaning if it's taken out of context. So it brings the whole context with it in a sense, like all of the memory and the culture of this ongoing conversation, whereas writing can be just taken out of context all the time. And that's part of the way the colonial administrations functioned there. Like, see, we have this deed. This is what you said in writing. And they, you know, abstracted from the mutual understandings in which the agreement was formed. So because you can't do that with wampum, Wampum in a sense carries more of a binding sense of agreement or a communal sense.

Mary Mahoney [00:07:06] What got Andrew into this text and led him to track it down at the National Archives was a reference he saw to a story the Munsees shared about their interactions with the first Dutch settlers in Manhattan.

Andrew Newman [00:07:19] Well, the reason that I proposed to include this particular document in the Hidden Literacies Project was because of the particular elements and the Munsees traditional account of the first contact with the Dutch in New York Harbor and what's now Manhattan Island. What they claimed was that the Dutch colonists asked for a little tract of land, as much land as the hide of a bullock or an ox could cover, and then that the colonists cut the land up into long, thin strips and laid it out in a circle and claimed all the land that it could enclose as a circle. So it seems like this kind of wild folkloric element. And actually there are similar stories that are folkloric stories about Heidrick that's that's conducted in this way. But classical scholars would recognize it as a motif that appears most prominently in the story of the Phoenician queen Dido's founding of the North African colony of Carthage, where she took the bull's hide, made a deal with the Carthaginian king, Hiabus, and cut it up into a long, thin strip and established the site for the citadel in Carthage. So when I was looking at this instance that first came up for me in Delaware and Munsee traditions and recognized that classical parallel, I started to wonder about whether it exists elsewhere. And I looked in folkloric indexes and found that it's really an established folkloric motif, but that it pertains especially to stories that took place in the 17th, really 16th and 17th century about the colonial foundings of maritime outposts in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. There's instances from Taiwan, from Java, from India, Burma, Cambodia, the Philippines, in which native peoples and recorded oral traditions describe how the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish colonists use this trick to establish their outposts. So it's a rather unique, you know, sort of set of circumstances in which a Native American tradition has these counterparts like from all over the world with a very specific story element about the early modern colonists, you know, especially the Dutch in New Amsterdam and the Dutch also in Taiwan, South Africa, all of these far-flung locations.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:44] For Andrew, this posed a historical problem or a question.

Andrew Newman [00:09:48] And for me, this poses the kind of historical problem like how is this pattern of distribution possible? I came up with what I think of as the most sort of the cleanest explanation. And it's one that doesn't seem possible to some historians. So it's really it's a way of historical thinking. My argument is that the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish colonists who all knew what, they didn't know one another, but they were all associated through the Hapsburg Empire and they copied each other's sort of imperial modus operandi. They were doing the same sorts of things in the same places that they were actually emulating the story of Dido. And so they went up to these native peoples and they took out an ox hide and they asked for this land in this way. Just as the tradition described. Most scholars who look at it initially would say, like this is just kind of a story that went around and maybe it's a metaphor that native peoples came up with to describe the colonial deceit.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:42] So some historians or literary scholars might say, yes, this story keeps popping up in different traditions, but that doesn't mean it literally happened. It's just a story people tell. So is this a historical account of how the Dutch tricked the Munsees out of land using a trick from classical antiquity? Or is it just a story that evolved after the fact to explain the deception? For Andrew, it's a historical account of the Munsees interactions with the Dutch. It's not a story shared to communicate the degree to which they've been historically deceived by colonial powers in the United States, but rather a measure of the scope and detail of the record keeping on which they base their current claims.

Andrew Newman [00:11:27] For me and circling back to that Munsee petition and the claims that they're now making in 1849 of President Taylor, they're making this important claim to historical accuracy. It's not like this is a metaphor for what happened. It's like this is what actually happened and we agreed to it. In 1609 or so we gave you, because they considered the Dutch colonists to be, you know, sort of continuous with the United States government. We gave you land then, you give us land now. You know, we gave you this tract of Manhattan real estate. You should give us some land out in the Great Plains where we can have a homeland of our own again.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:01] As the Andrew goes on to note in his commentary, this matters, quote, because it's a challenging test case that vindicates indigenous memory work over a colonial documentary evidence. For the Munsee memorialists, their traditional knowledge is not incidental, as Schoolcraft seems to think, but significant to their present demands. The memories of the 1805 Treaty of Fort Industry, the 1757 Treaty of Easton and the early 17th century arrival of the Dutch compose a coherent historical narrative and claim to historical knowledge. It's important to the Munsees that they were the first to greet the colonists and to give them land. What they're proposing in 1849 is a long, protracted exchange: a tract of valuable Manhattan real estate for a tract of, quote, vacant land on the Great Plains, unquote. Importantly, just because there is no European or American account of this deception does not mean it didn't happen.

Mary Mahoney [00:13:06] The fact that the Munsees have such a long and detailed history of their interactions and agreements signifies the power of their memory work across multiple forms of literacy. This can be an important lesson student researchers take away from working with this text, as Andrew explains.

Andrew Newman [00:13:23] What it tells us is not to adhere too closely to the view that if something happened, therefore it's going to be, you know, written down in a document. And conversely, if it's not in a document, then it didn't happen. So to be flexible about your what we could call our historical epistemology, our understanding of the past, and to realize that records are always partial, they always belong to a context. They don't always tell the truth. And therefore, we can't depend all of our arguments on what we would think of as solid evidence. Instead, we should always have the kind of flexibility to speculate and to say like what might be more accurate or what we think might be more accurate than what we can conclusively determine was the case.

Mary Mahoney [00:14:10] By way of closing, Andrew challenges us to think with this document and what it can help us understand about today's media culture.

Andrew Newman [00:14:18] I think all of us, you know, especially since 2016, like all of us, think about these questions all the time, right about how words are drastically taken out of context constantly and made to mean something different than what they perhaps had meant in a mutually understood context originally. And even in what I just said, I just use the passive voice. So words are taken out of context all the time. But I would say that a lot of political actors deliberately do this kind of work with language where they take meanings out of context and deliberately attribute misleading understandings to them. So I think that looking at these past documents can really help us with sort of present day media literacy.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:04] Andrew Newman is professor of English and History at Stony Brook University. Listeners who want to learn more about Andrew's work should check out

his 2019 book, *Allegories of Encounter: Colonial Literacy and Indian Captivities*, and 2012's *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists and the Media of History and Memory*.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:27] *Hidden Literacies* is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to *Hidden Literacies*. For more information on *Hidden Literacies* and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.hiddenliteracies.org