A Trope in Time: Putting English on Historical Literacy

By Gabriel A. Reich, Virginia Commonwealth University

Historical literacy has increasingly been used to describe the goal of K12 history/social studies education. The approach is informed by empirical and philosophical work that enquires into the nature of historical knowledge and the literacy practices of historians (Wineburg, 2001). Pedagogies based on the emerging model of historical literacy foreground *corroboration*, or testing the relationship between what is presented in different historical documents, and between such documents and what is known about the historical context in which they were composed (Reisman, 2012). In particular, these practices focus students on the positionality of document authors vis à vis the societies they inhabited.

Although powerful, historical literacy approaches have minimalized pedagogies that help students recognize narrative tropes and they ways in which they function to communicate historical truth. To cultivate sensitivity to narrative, students should learn not only to ask, "Is this historically true?"—always important—but also, "What narrative trope is at work here, and how does it construe change over time? Or, as a novelist might ask, "If I use one trope instead of another, how do I make the world appear one way and not another?" These questions, more typical of English language arts than other content areas, can open up lines of inquiry for students of history (cf. White, 1973).

Let's apply the ELA lens to a ubiquitous artifact of history education in our time, the multiple-choice question (see also Reich, 2011). The particular question I will explore appeared on a district mandated 6th-grade benchmark test administered to my own daughter. The question includes no historically correct answer choices. Nevertheless, each answer choice conforms to narrative tropes that are common in the culture. Moreover, each trope evokes a contemporary political discourse that configures the world in particular ways. For students attempting to answer a multiple-choice question devoid of fact, one probable course of action is to assess the plausibility of the responses. To do so, you read the question and an answer choice as a narrative statement (see Reich, 2011). Students may gauge plausibility by the extent to which the narratives conform to familiar tropes (Reich, 2009; Wertsch, 2002).

The question that appeared on the exam was the following:

23. During the Civil War, African Americans –

A.   served only as soldiers in the Confederate army

B.   fought in both the southern and northern forces

C.   served in the same regiments as white soldiers

D.   fought only in minor battles

The historical facts are that African Americans served as soldiers only in the Union army, in segregated units led by White officers. African American units, which by war's end made up 10% of the Union army, fought in a number of major battles helping the Union secure victory (Foner, 2005).

The stem itself does not provide much in the way of narrative elements. We are given a subject "African Americans," a diverse group that is presented as a singular historical actor, silently occluding women entirely. This device is common in both history textbooks and multiple-choice questions.

The first answer choice states that African Americans served only as soldiers in the Confederate army. Knowledge of the institution of slavery and the reasons for Secession are sufficient to eliminate this response as plausible. If, however, a student remembers that African Americans only fought for one side in the war, and she forgot what that side was called, this answer would be plausible.

The second choice states that African Americans "fought in both the southern and northern forces." No qualifier is given before "fought," thus the statement leads the reader to infer that participation in both armies was roughly equal. This is a familiar narrative trope. We are often presented with such (false) equivalencies in our news-media, especially in regards to politics and world affairs (see Beckerman & Zembylas, 2012). The mere repetition of this equivalency trope lends it the air of legitimacy. If either of the first two responses were true, then the Civil War was fought over the issues of federalism and states' rights rather than slavery and freedom. This position resonates with today's political discourse particularly for conservatives and libertarians who want to limit the power of the federal

government to disrupt local power hierarchies.

The third choice consists of a statement that African Americans "served in the same regiments as white soldiers." This narrative implies that African Americans served as soldiers on both sides of the conflict, and that this service was performed on equal terms with Whites. This narrative resonates with contemporary "colorblind" and meritocratic ideologies that actively occlude race as a meaningful social category.

The final answer choice, states that African Americans "fought only in minor battles," stands out from the others in that it seeks to minimize the African American contribution to the outcome of the war itself. The plausibility of this response is supported by several narrative tropes in our culture that minimize the active roles played by people of color in our history.

The aim of the historical literacy approach is to enhance the civic judgment of young people by engaging them in inquiries that pose historical questions and engage the close reading of texts to answer those questions. This approach could be strengthened by a parallel focus on the use of narrative tropes in historical texts, mass media, and in the arguments that students themselves make. As the question above illustrated, such tropes can stand in for detailed historical knowledge and preclude a more reflective, open approach to studying the past. If we want students, and teachers, to be more self-aware in regards to how their reading of the world (Friere, 2000/1970) is textured by a set of stock narratives, then it will be useful to engage students with inquiry questions that, at first blush, seem more at home in English class.

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Gabriel A. Reich is an Associate Professor of secondary history education at Virginia Commonwealth University. His research interests include collective memory, pedagogy, and assessment. He can be reached at greich@vcu.edu