

Constructing Black Presence in Arizona's State Capitol Museum: Performing a Responsive Rhetorical Art in a Contested Site of Public Memory

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Abstract: In this study, we track some of the key rhetorical decisions that underlie Melovee's professional contributions to the Buffalo Soldier exhibit at the Arizona State Capitol Museum. In exploring how her rhetorical education translated into performance, we attend to how rhetorical concepts contributed to her success. This study has four main parts. The first (Tracking Transformation) presents our methods for tracing evidence of rhetorical education at work. Then, after accounting for the political conflict in which the Buffalo Soldier exhibit was embroiled (section two, Rhetorical Crossover), the third section (Situating Melovee's Contributions) contextualizes the installation that Melovee was responsible for researching and designing within the exhibit at large. The fourth (A Deeper Dive) dramatizes the acuity and significant staying power of Melovee's rhetorical expertise, nurturing visitors' "critical imagination" (Royster and Kirsch) while producing panels for the now-permanent exhibit for one of the state's premier history museums.

Keywords: [critical imagination](#), [rhetorical crossover](#), [rhetorical education](#), [Black presence](#)

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Melovee Easley's first job out of college put her rhetorical education to the test. She was recruited to join a team at the Arizona State Capitol Museum as it undertook designing a new exhibit featuring Black soldiers' role in the making of Arizona. These troops earned the name "Buffalo Soldiers" from the Native Americans who observed them as tough and thick skinned, and difficult to stop. "[T]heir Indian counterparts," writes Jonathan Earle, "saw a resemblance between the hair of the Black cavalymen and the hair of the buffalo, an animal many considered sacred" (93). Previously, as a college intern for the Phoenix Art Museum, Melovee had facilitated creative outreach initiatives for the city's youth, and the state capitol valued what she brought to the museum's efforts to tell more inclusive histories that would appeal to a broader range of visitors. Toward this end, making the topic of African American cavalry troops formed in 1866 accessible to the Museum's diverse range of visitors might seem challenging enough. That storyline might go something like this: Just as the Emancipation Proclamation ostensibly freed southern Black people, south-

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ern White violence against Black people soared and reconstruction efforts lagged, then fell apart, further restricting viable options for people of color to live a decent life. Black men enlisted in the military as one of the few available routes toward national belonging. But in *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram Kendi exposes the “cruel irony” embedded in US military efforts to recruit Black men to service for the purpose of western expansion: Black men were recruited to military service to “kill indigenous communities” on land White settlers sought to claim as their own (240). Given this cruel irony, to design the exhibit was to ask how to engage museum visitors - including the dozens of veterans, school children and policy makers who visit the state capitol each year - in these historical complexities? Further complicating matters, just as Melovee and her team had figured out their approach to the exhibit, proposed state legislation prohibited state-sponsored educational materials from referencing institutional racism (directly or indirectly) - ratcheting up the stakes for her rhetorical acumen. The team would need to rewrite the content to comply with the legislation while still staying true to historical records. How, then, to proceed? As Melovee observed: delicately.

In this study, we track key rhetorical decisions that underlie Melovee’s professional contributions to the exhibit. In exploring how her rhetorical education translated into performance, we attend to how rhetorical practices contributed to her success. This study has five main parts. The first (Tracking Transformation) presents our methods for tracing evidence of rhetorical education at work. Then, after accounting for the political conflict in which the Buffalo Soldier exhibit was embroiled (section two, Rhetorical Crossover), the third section (Situating Melovee’s Contributions) contextualizes Melovee’s rhetorical decision making within the exhibit at large. The fourth (Conjuring Black Presence) and fifth (A Deeper Dive) dramatize the acuity and significant staying power of Melovee’s rhetorical expertise, producing panels for the now-permanent exhibit for one of the state’s premier history museums.

At the Arizona State Capitol Museum, Melovee’s rhetorical acumen was in high demand. The museum’s staff had recruited her to their team in their efforts to upgrade the museum’s exhibits that address controversial topics in Arizona history, such as Japanese internment and civil rights. Staff members had seen firsthand that content could inadvertently trigger different, sometimes conflicting, visitor reactions. With Melovee on board, the team sought to improve the inclusivity and accuracy of existing materials and to introduce new multicultural exhibits. Since 2012, local historical organizations across the state had been actively wrestling with the racism that pervades their records, storerooms and archival practices, taking concerted efforts to better reflect the diversity of the state’s constituencies (*AZ Archives Matrix Report* qtd. in Godoy). The director of Melovee’s team circulated resources, including one Melovee recalls that was designed to help museums deliberately welcome LGBTQ+ visitors. As for Melovee, she describes her art as knowing how to read between the lines; how, that is, to detect rhetorical turns in museum content that could cause visitors to stop engaging with it. Through her undergraduate rhetorical education and other life experiences, Melovee had gleaned that any reader may shut down or get defensive when they detect unacknowledged editorializing, erasures, and other such rhetorical sleights of hand that, as Carolyn Miller puts it, “hide ... the tools” employed to create the text they’re reading (20-21). The visitors at the museum were no exception. Early on, Melovee saw that visitors - sensing such devices - could get angry, interrupt tours,

get defensive, even leave post haste. The staff had much to learn from these encounters. Attuned as she is to the politics of rhetorical uptake, how would Melovee participate in the construction of Black presence at the state capitol museum's Buffalo Soldier exhibit?

Today, the *Ready and Forward: Exploring the Legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers* awaits you as you round the east corner of the imposing neoclassical Arizona State Capitol Museum. The exhibit consists of three rooms, each connected by a standard threshold and walls with light fixtures that retain the building's early 1900s character. Panels, photographs and artifacts beckon visitors through the exhibit's doors. Among the exhibit's installations, Melovee was directly responsible for proposing, researching, composing and designing "Meet a Buffalo Soldier." The installation primarily features soldiers for whom historical records are relatively rich, thanks to their letters home, their memoirs and other books and writings. This essay focuses on a panel featuring a soldier for whom the historical record is far sparser: Cathay Williams.

Tracking Transformation

Following Flower's lead in *Outcomes of Engaged Education*, this study seeks to track how Melovee transformed her rhetorical education post-graduation. We have worked from the premise that Melovee's rhetorical education would be effective to the extent that it could support her pursuit of personal and professional goals, amid "the blooming, buzzing confusion" of an activity, where contradiction is not only likely, but a force that drives creative change (James qtd. in Flower, *Outcomes* 26). The starting point for our inquiry was ENG 205: Introduction to Writing, Rhetorics and Literacies, a requirement that Ellie taught in Melovee's major field of study. Here, Melovee and her classmates tried out methods for eliciting clues of readers' constructive meaning-making processes - or "movies of the mind" (Elbow 85; Flower, "Difference-Driven" 321) - identifying where readers may find themselves having questions; testing competing hunches about where a line of argument is going; and drawing on personal experiences or importing cultural concepts and social axioms to bring to life the drama of the text and to interpret complex situations (Higgins et al.). This call-and-response-and-call-again orientation to difference-driven public inquiry is the basis of what Ellie has termed a *responsive rhetorical art*, that "intense, collaboratively constructed give-and-take" of early rhetorical uptake "that calls a public into being and gets it on its feet" (Long 8).

A challenge for a responsive rhetorical art in general and Melovee's museum work in particular is to design content that can call readers to consider a text's experiential details on their own terms without overwriting them with prevailing cultural scripts or personal expectations. Consequently, we've been on the lookout for ways Melovee operationalized the intersubjective rhetorical sensibility practiced in ENG 205. But this likely wouldn't be a one-to-one transfer from class to the workplace, Flower reminds us. Rather, Melovee would have internalized relational, audience-focused composing methods from ENG 205 along with all the other concepts, practices and experiences that constitute her rhetorical education. Of interest, then, is how she transformed that rhetorical education to serve her own purposes.

The study entailed a series of cued-recall interviews, the transcripts of which basis for this co-authored piece. The first took place on August 17, 2022, in the museum itself as Melovee walked Ellie through the exhibit as it opened its doors; the other two, the summer of 2024 over Zoom. Methodologically, the initial interview holds important value, offering timely glimpses of Melovee's rhetorical know-how central to Flower's theory of rhetorical transformation: Melovee's "working theory" of content design (*Outcomes* 79). Though related to the stabilized and normalized version of rhetorical knowledge that gets tidied up for academic circulation, a working theory is a distinct mode of know-how that is decidedly more performative, intuitive, dynamic and often inchoate. (See Flower, *Outcomes* 63, 72, 99.) So periodically, we quote directly from Melovee's initial walk-through interview, as well as early articulations of her own "movies of the mind" to honor the lively rhetorical know-how that serves as the heartbeat of this inquiry (Elbow 85; Flower, "Difference-Driven" 321).

While co-authoring the study, we explicitly negotiated the sort of concerns addressed in *Stories of Becoming: Demystifying the Professoriate for Graduate Students in Composition and Rhetoric*. In addition, Thomas Catlaw's "What's the Use of Being Practical" proved instrumental, not only for dramatizing a thread of interdisciplinary scholarship that spans our two fields (public affairs and rhetorical studies) but also for commending a pragmatic side of academic theory that each of us found applicable to the distinct professional writing she does daily. Just as importantly, *Peitho's* open-access transdisciplinary feminist mission inspired us to place this study in this peer-reviewed journal, one that Melovee could link to in her dossier and Ellie could assign in future public-rhetoric courses she teaches.

Rhetorical Crossover: Accounting for Political Conflict

Cedric Burrows's theory of rhetorical crossover illuminated the political conflict that Melovee found herself in the middle of at the state capitol museum. Effective rhetorical crossover entails "revamp[ing] how [historically white institutions] include and depict the Black rhetorical presence in their educational materials, visual images, and social discourses" (139). This work affords Black people "the ability to enter these institutions on their own terms ... to face the world that taxes them, but with fuller and replenished selves ready for the future" (139). Quite literally, the buffalo soldier exhibit exemplifies rhetorical crossover. There's always been people of color in Arizona, but the state capitol museum has been historically a white museum. Through the exhibit, Black presence is crossing over into this historically white rhetorical space, making present Black people, specifically buffalo soldiers, in a state-sponsored public memory site that has previously prioritized white historical figures.

Here's the predictive punch of Burrows's theory: it anticipated the legislation, House Bill 2112, that interfered with the production of *Ready and Forward* at the AZ state capitol. The bill proposed prohibiting the "use [of] public monies for instruction that promotes or advocates for any form of blame or judgment on the basis of race, ethnicity or sex" (Section 2A). This proposal was part of a concerted effort across the US in the early 2020s to "ban ... teaching or even discussing race, racial relations, and slavery" (Graff 5;

see also Faison). On the one hand, such “race-neutral” legislative efforts are as old as the history of the US (McMartin and Diaz, par. 1; see also Katz; Kimball). What distinguished legislative efforts this time was the amount of money behind the movement and how organized it was (Graff). Nationally, special interest groups provided language for state legislators to use to criminalize educational claims that racism is systemic—embedded in the country’s institutions, laws, business practices, and governance (Crenshaw). Among the eight precepts HB 2112 sought to ban was “material that could cause an individual ‘DISCOMFORT, GUILT, ANGUISH OR ANY OTHER FORM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS ON ACCOUNT OF THE INDIVIDUAL’S RACE, ETHNICITY OR SEX’” (Section B.6.).

Burrows’s umbrella term for such legislation is whitesplaining: public discourse, in whatever form, that leverages power to deny and hide both white privilege and its intent to undermine what people of color need to flourish. As an example of whitesplaining, Burrows cites the retort “All Lives Matter” in response to the claim that “Black Lives Matter.” As a political slogan “All Lives Matter” seeks to erase white racism by “ignoring the white power establishment” and “failing to detail the racist actions inflicted upon African Americans” (109). Burrows shows that the enthymeme refers not to all people as it alleges but, in fact, to the institution of policing responsible for so much brutality against Black and Brown bodies (122-24). Likewise, HB 2112 refuses to admit or acknowledge the effort white people in power have exerted to preserve that power and associated benefits. As a form of whitesplaining, HB 2112 protects white citizens from acknowledging ways they are implicated in historic injustices and continue to benefit from the country’s racialized social structures. HB 2112 obfuscated the racist logic behind its ostensible intent to protect learners from civics lessons that may cause feelings of guilt or discomfort. Burrows’s theory helped us trace ways that HB 2112 sought to preserve the dominant narrative that white actors make history at the expense of other histories that are also part of the founding of the state.

Even though the bill was engrossed in the House of Representatives - that is, never making it to the Senate or becoming actual law - the bill continues to destabilize public education. A few months after the bill was engrossed in the House, Arizona’s secretary of education took formal efforts to implement the intent of the bill: “a hotline for the public to ‘declare war’ on ‘inappropriate’ school lessons that focus on race, gender and sexuality, and social-emotional learning” (Sullivan 90). In tandem with deleterious effects of the pandemic, the state’s political hostilities directed at educators makes recruiting and retaining Arizona public school teachers a state-wide crisis (Wolfe). Because Melovee and her team were creating material for a state-sponsored educational site, their content for the exhibit had to be rewritten to avoid racialized language - substituting the term “Anglo” for “White,” for instance - while accounting for a tense history recruiting recently freed Black people to the military and then pitting them against Native Americans in the founding of Arizona. Even though the secretary of state was no fan of the bill, and even though the bill never became law, the museum designers were still asked to comply with it. Anything less, this line of argument cautioned, could attract public attention and foment support for the far-right candidate who would be running against the secretary of state for governor on a platform that would cut funding to public education.

Situating Melovee's Contributions

Melovee's own rhetorical decision-making unfolded in relation to several distinctive features of the exhibit, including the following:

- features that map implication through figures - a contribution of the team at large;
- features that support public talk, including talk among youth of color - another contribution of the team at large; and
- features that conjure the lives of individual soldiers - a contribution distinct to Melovee.

Together, these features help distribute the communicative burden for making visible to visitors complex moral and political fallout of state violence embedded in western expansion. The distribution of this communicative burden is especially important in light of Burrows's argument to public workers to mitigate the Black tax that people of color are too often made to pay when white people go about revamping their institutions (126-31).

Mapping Implication through Figures

Figures throughout *Ready and Forward: Exploring the Legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers* help visitors to map western expansion through figures. In *Implicated Subjects*, public-memory theorist Michael Rothberg explains, "A figure ... serves as a trope for describing a contingent, shifting, and socially constituted position in that world" (199). Rothberg studied effective public-memory sites commemorating lives lost to state violence in Rwanda, Germany and the US. His project explicates art installations that conjure - make present - implication, "our debts and responsibilities to people both near and far" (xv) ... "for the deeds carried out in the name of their nation (17). Several panels and artifacts map for visitors the relations among key figures in the making of Arizona's state history:

- *the figure of the Indigenous peoples*, including the O'odham and Piipaash, whose land the museum occupies; this figure is also invoked, for instance, through references on various panels to the Cheyenne, the Plains Indians, the Apache, and the Lakota.
- *the figure of the buffalo soldier* undertaking the country's multi-faceted nation-building efforts on the heels of the Civil War. The panels depict the Buffalo Soldiers, for instance, escorting the US mail service, protecting settlers, and settling labor disputes among miners.
- *the figure of the white settler* whose presence pervades panels throughout the room, with references, for instance, to westward expansion, manifest destiny, the US mail service, the National Park service, and mining - projects which buffalo soldiers protected, and all of which served settlers' interests.
- *the figure of the nation-state*, as well as the state of Arizona as an extension of state power - again served by the labor and lives of buffalo soldiers and at the cost of Indigenous people's lives.

The panel on the Indian Wars from 1866 to 1890, for instance, explicitly addresses the recruitment of Black soldiers to the military to remove and kill Indigenous people in the name of nation-building.

Panels about the national parks trace how western expansion imperiled open spaces—thus both launching the conservation movement and its legacy of national parks, on the one hand, and its racialized campaign rationalizing the forceful removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands, on the other. Positioning figures' relations to one another in this way, the exhibit maps what Rothberg theorizes as the *implicated subject* and *complex implication*. Where the legacy of the settler in western expansion occupies the position of the implicated subject, “inhabit[ing] the machinery of political violence, economic exploitation, and ecological devastation” (200), the figure of the buffalo soldier occupies the position of “complex implication,” which Rothberg defines as “the experience of occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and to histories of perpetration” (91).

As this overview indicates, a multi-pronged tension is built into the rhetorical life of the exhibit's panels. Indigenous Americans are among the museum's constituents. This state-sponsored public memory site has a responsibility to do right by them and their ancestors, including making visible ways that westward expansion, racism, and conservation have reinforced the country's genocidal campaigns (Powell). Through the mapping of figures, the exhibit's design team invites visitors to consider matters of implication that House Bill 2112 sought to take off the table. Doing so, the exhibit offers the possibility of mapping “otherwise matrices” such as those that Rachel Jackson (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma) traces in “Decolonizing Black and Indigenous Dispossession.” Referencing “relationships and alliances between African and Native American peoples,” Jackson interprets the political conditions to which buffalo soldiers were recruited as a history of colonized place that “spatializes race, coupling not only indigenous loss of life and land and black slave labor, but also the struggles of indigenous and black peoples to resist” (78).

Mapping implications is just a first step. Like Jackson, Rothberg argues that actual transformative public memory requires more robust self-other relationalities than the handy, yet reductive victim-perpetrator binary affords. More expansive relationalities are necessary to transform guilt and privilege into productive qualities. “The ultimate point” of such mapping, concludes Rothberg “is not to dwell on or in implication, but to transfigure it”: to “open ... the self to others ...” (201). Rothberg terms this social capacity *transfiguring implication*. In her position at the museum, Melovee was similarly attuned. In relation to the complex array of relationships the full exhibit makes visible, our focus here is on what Melovee saw herself doing. Her rhetorical strategies for creating Black presence are particularly illuminating.

Supporting Public Talk, Including Talk Among Youth of Color

“Talking in museums,” writes Adam Gopnik in “The Mindful Museum,” “is one of the things that make them matter” (qtd. in Greer and Taylor 74). Additional features of the exhibit were strategically placed along the tour path to foster conversation among young people even as those same panels made available to older visitors the tragic history behind the country's national parks. For instance, eye-level to young elementary school children, several panels feature innovations and achievements in hopes of sparking conversation. “The Ranger Hat” is one of those panels. With an eye-catching image of Smokey the Bear looking the visitor

in the eye to say, “Only You,” an excerpt from the “The Ranger Hat” panel reads as follows:



Figure 1: A bear in a hat and holding a shovel tells the viewer, “Only you [can prevent forest fires.]” Photo taken at the museum by Elenore Long

Buffalo Soldiers are credited with introducing the Montana Peak ranger hat, or the “lemon squeezer hat,” a known symbol of the U.S. National Park Rangers.... The Buffalo Soldiers discovered that pinching the four symmetrical quadrants of their hats helped to shed rain away from their heads. When the first park rangers started their service, the practical hat was kept as part of their uniform.

Another panel features the all-Black 25th Infantry Regiment Bicycle Corps, a unit of buffalo soldiers called Iron Riders. As the “Iron Rider” panel explains, they biked from Missoula, Montana, to Yellowstone National Park, and also the 1900 miles across the Rocky Mountains to St. Louis, Missouri.



Figure 2: Eight soldiers stand astride bicycles atop a glacier. Reprinted with permission from Montana Historical Society

The bicycle unit attracted great attention wherever they stopped and even had their own press detail. ... The Buffalo Soldier expeditions are some of the first documented events of mountain biking in U.S. history.

For young visitors, the panels convey the accomplishments of ingenious outdoorsmen, including damn impressive mountain biking. It was important to Melovee that the exhibit convey this sheer impressiveness. In our walk-through interview, she explained why: “Buffalo soldiers were a big part of the existence of national parks. They worked to build roadways and to maintain the parks. They actually rode horses and bikes through parks and were stewards of the parks.” It was also important to her that the exhibit convey the larger historical context sensitively, with attention to how the telling of that history could affect those learning it. In our walk-through interview, she continued: “The history of the national parks is also very tragic. So, there’s a lot of responsibility in exposing the youth to sensitive topics and how that could

impact their perception of themselves, especially young African Americans or any youth of color.”

In light of this responsibility, Melovee researched how to explain challenging histories, including histories that involve racial tensions and discrimination, in ways that won't keep creating that narrative of limitation - a concern that also motivates Jackson's and Rothberg's scholarship. She credits the professional organizations to which she belongs, including the Smithsonian Museum and the Museum Association of America, with offering useful methods. In this context, research became a process of doing a lot of deep dives into how to make history accessible. Once the exhibit opened, Melovee's position included guiding tours to visitors, including youth. In that role, she taught them about some of the ugly things in US history. As the two of us walked through the exhibit, she commented: "They have so many questions, and they really want to understand, 'Who am I in this state? Why did this happen?'" In this role, she mused, engaging such questions became "the most challenging part of my job."

Conjuring Black Presence: "Meet a Buffalo Soldier"



Figure 3: Portrait of a Black soldier in full military regalia. Photo taken at the AZ State Capitol Museum by Elenore Long

The five panels that Melovee researched and composed for the "Meet a Buffalo Soldier" installation are the only panels in the exhibit that conjure the personhood of individual soldiers rather than figures. Each depicts a soldier whom she selected for the installation, including a portrait as well as several concise paragraphs dramatizing key dimensions of the soldier's life. The significance of Melovee's approach is ontological. Slavery specifically and racism more broadly deny the very ontologies of people of color (Maldonado-Torres). To counter this violence, Burrows commends practices for constructing Black presence in historically white institutions that affirm Black personhood on the individual Black person's "own terms" (139). It's this grounded attention to the humanity of Black people that they name for themselves in relation to the rich African American rhetorical tradition that, Burrows argues, holds the greatest promise for effectively revamp-

ing historically white institutions. Similarly, Melovee strove to create with visitors something of the real-life distinctiveness of the five soldiers - yes, referencing their roles as soldiers, but also their individual humanity, an achievement especially significant given the insidious ways whitesplaining in general and HB 2112 specifically denies ways institutional racism would undermine the capacity of people of color to thrive. Dedicating the final section of this article to the Cathay Williams panel, here we analyze the panels of the four men whom Melovee selected to feature in the installation: Henry Flipper, Corporal Isiah Mays, Chaplain George Prioleau, and Colonel Charles Young.

One strategy Melovee used to conjure Black presence was to pair the textual panels with artifacts of the actual soldiers. For instance, the full uniforms of Charles Young and George Prioleau are displayed in the glass cases, almost gazing back at the panels, sharing the story of the once-living soldiers who wore the navy and decorated fabrics. Since the museum actually has Young's jacket and his shoes, it made sense to Melovee to bring that material into the story. That way, people are not only reading his biography and story, but they're also encountering traces of his life in visual and literal ways - as if to say, *This was a real soldier*. In some cultural traditions, people are buried with their items and their objects because they contain their essence. So, the installation's combination of textual biography and artifacts moves into an in-between space where the legacies of the soldiers continue to live.

Another strategy for creating Black presence was Melovee's use of the first person. For museum studies scholars, writing in someone else's voice, often from mere traces of evidence, inevitably requires nuanced judgment (Greer and Grobman). This judgment must bridge the premise of history as a scientific discipline - dedicated to the systematic study of "collective enterprises" - and the truths of individual stories encoding personal memories that cannot be corroborated (Popkin 50; see also Lee). Such renderings, then, also carry the ethical imperatives to avoid appropriating someone who is no longer able to set the record straight or flattening someone who lived a fully dimensional life (Rogers and Jacobi). The strategy also has the potential to convey tremendous vibrancy (Page and Rotunno).

So attuned, Melovee read all the primary material she could get her hands on, from the soldiers' letters, briefs, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, and interviews, as well as secondary sources. She then synthesized her sense of each soldier - conjuring the distinct tone and register she had experienced while reading the soldier's own writing. During our initial walk-through interview, Melovee explained:

Take Charles Young, for example. He had a very eloquent writing voice. He has a medal of honor and he did some very profound things in the calvary to really support the country. From reading his biographies, I knew he was empowered by his position, and he was very proud to be a buffalo soldier. And he also experienced a lot of injustice and a lot of prejudice. So I decided, *I don't want to talk about him, but I want to resurrect his voice, because I feel like that would create a strong emotional connection. He could speak to us that way*. I felt that keeping that distinct tone of his would help empower the youth, or whoever was reading the panel to be proud of being a person of color.

At the bottom of each panel, Melovee complemented her biographical rendering with a direct quotation from the respective soldier. The quotation at the bottom of Young's panel reads: "The thing then to be desired above all others is confidence in one's self." Across this and the other panels, Melovee's goal was to enliven visitors' senses of these men as teachers and smart people who understood deep and complex matters.

As for Young, so, too, the others. Their presence in the military was regularly met with systemic contempt. And the panels unfold in relation to this evidence. Though honored for his military service, for instance, Mays was denied a military pension for his service: "I became poor and ended up at the Arizona State Asylum for the Insane until I eventually died in 1925 at the age of 67." Similarly, Henry Flipper served with distinction ("I became known as the highest-ranking Buffalo Soldier stationed in the West") but was also the subject of a smear campaign for which he was dismissed from the Army in 1882.

The panel featuring Prioleau documents his condemnation of the military system which he had loyally served. The panel explains that having fallen ill to malaria before he could ship off on a military campaign to Cuba, Prioleau served as a recruitment officer in the South. There, the panel reads, "I was shocked by the amount of inequality I witnessed." From that point on, he refused to recruit Black men to the US military, an institution he had previously valued as a site for Black social mobility. As Melovee puts it, "My stance was, *Let's engage the history honestly.*"

Nurturing Movies of the Mind

Given that most museum visitors wouldn't access the archival resources that helped Melovee bring the soldiers to life for herself, Melovee's aim was to provide sufficient historical details to help span this distance. One line of inferential reasoning attends to timelines contextualized in the panels. Along these lines, one movie that Melovee conjured goes like this:

I'm pretty sure Henry Flipper was at West Point while Charles Young was there doing what he was doing. From reading Flipper's autobiography, I know that when he went through the cadet training, he faced very similar hostility referenced in Young's panel. I can only imagine that they were also influencing each other and communicating with each other. And I'd almost imagine, potentially, Flipper confided with Charles Young regarding his experience.

In another such movie of the mind, Melovee conjures a scene in which Young offers encouragement to young Black men who, like him, faced institutional racism:

I could only imagine off script the conversations where Young is telling the new recruits: "They're going to doubt you 'cause you're part of the Black community. Don't let those things get to your head. Don't ever let someone say you're not enough. Always challenge. Always rise. Keep going. Strive for excel-

lence.” These are some of the things that some of the more distinguished, I think, African American people had to embody and teach to the youth. So I’d imagine he was probably a very empowering teacher and commander to other African Americans.

The panel’s biographical information serves as grist - what can actually be known about the men - with which visitors are invited to imagine something of the soldiers’ actual lives. Such evidence-based imaginative conjurings complicate a one-dimensional stereotype of military brawn, and they build more accurate representations of the country’s educational and military institutions from which the soldiers sought belonging.

A Deeper Dive: Spurring Visitors to Engage Critically and Imaginatively with a Scant Historical Record

Concepts from feminist historical rhetoric help amplify and explain the rhetorical decisions that Melovee made to write the fifth and final panel in “Meet a Buffalo Soldier” recognizing Cathay Williams, the only known female buffalo soldier. The primary materials available for the men in the installation were substantial, providing resources for deciding how to conjure something of each man’s personality and life story for the panel dedicated to him. But for the fifth soldier featured in the installation, Cathay Williams, the historical record is far more scant - a single newspaper interview and a couple of medical records. Additionally, the soldier’s very legitimacy in the military is a matter of some controversy, having disguised her gender in order to join the army. Given that women were prohibited from joining the military at the time, the disguise, some argue, is inherently deceptive and thus should disqualify her from inclusion as a buffalo soldier, and (the argument goes) would certainly justify the military’s decision to deny her disability pension. How, then, to precede? This question is indicative of a research problem driving contemporary feminist scholarship (Davis; Enoch and Jack; Fredlund, Hauman and Ouellette; Gaillet & Bailey; Gordon), including rhetorics of museums and memorials (Vaughn and Dayton): How to amplify the lives and voices of “women who are no longer alive to speak directly on their own behalf”? (Royster and Kirsch 71). The disciplinary language Jaqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch have provided researchers for dealing with gendered archival erasures, silences and gaps helps us see Melovee addressing a somewhat similar predicament as a writer of public memory, even though she hadn’t read Royster and Kirsch prior to writing this article.



Figure 4: A painting featuring a soldier in a blue uniform. Photograph taken at the museum by Elenore Long.

In *Making the World a Better Place*, Royster turns to archives from the same era of US history as that of the buffalo soldiers - immediately prior to, during and directly following the Civil War. Royster observes that for the Black formerly enslaved southern women following the war, “managing their own lives” was itself a sociopolitical feat marked by risk-taking in the face of limited life-options (5). For any women of the nineteenth century, these issues were “cloaked in invisibility and silence” (5-6). But for southern African American women, in particular, Royster points out, “the obfuscations and silences were even more complex” (6). Here, Williams’s decision to disguise her gender to join the Army takes on socio-political significance. As Melovee insisted throughout this project, it’s hard to fathom the degree to which Williams’s exercise of sovereignty, as the creator of her own fate and gender, relied on her capacity to defy the normative expectations of the categories that powerful individuals and popular opinion assigned to her.

Critical Imagination: A Research Practice for Holding in Check Three Reductive Interpretive Impulses

In the face of gendered archival silences and prevailing patriarchal attitudes, any of us, according to Royster and Kirsch in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, are susceptible to three mutually reinforcing tendencies that predictably interfere with the researcher’s ability to engage fragmentary or otherwise limited historical material. First, prevailing “conceptual frameworks” can keep us from engaging “what may be more in shadow, muted, and not immediately obvious.” (76). Left to their own devices, these orthodox “anointed assumptions” can frame what we expect to find in the archive and what we take it to mean (72). Museum exhibitions aren’t immune from this tendency. Darlene Clover, Nancy Taber and Kathy Sanford warn that “patriarchy’s epistemology of mastery” that infuses “visuals and narratives of exhibitions,” carries deleterious social consequences if not interrogated and deconstructed (143). Capitalizing this tendency, for instance, is Sarah Bird’s fictional account *Daughter of Daughter of a Queen* that romanticizes Williams as the gallant progeny of regal African ancestry. Such mainstream characterizations of Williams have everything to do with construction of Black presence. Burrows exposes the cost that too much rhetoric crossover exacts on Black people: re-configuring “features that make the Black rhetorical presence unique to become nonthreatening to white

audiences” (19). Not succumbing to this pressure presents its own challenges when, as in the case of Cathay Williams, traces of that person’s historical presence are particularly scant.

Second, researchers’ own personal values can interfere with our capacity to engage with women from the past who, evidence suggests, held values we ourselves would find objectionable. Royster and Kirsch urge feminist researchers to “look more systematically beyond our own contemporary values and assumptions” (76). In “(Re)telling the Times: The Tangled Memories of Confederate Spies Rose O’Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd,” Patricia Wilde documents the tendency to rewrite history to align with our own values. Too often, Wilde writes, contemporary biographies of Greenhow and Boyd “omit or mitigate the strong proslavery positions that are featured within their memoirs. As a result, these retellings create tangled memories ...” (303). This tendency is evident, too, in how Cathay Williams has been represented in the country’s larger cultural imaginary where non-fiction human interest stories about Williams construct the arc of the article to uphold the military’s decision to deny Williams her pension (Blanton; Harris). From this defense, one such article adjudicates Williams’s character as “wily” and “deceptive” (Blanton par 19). In discussing these characterizations, Melovee stressed how important context is for evaluating characterizations of Williams as deceptive. In the south at the time, deception abounded. A lot of newly freed people did not know whom to trust. In that time period, they could be walking among friends, and all of a sudden, a so-called friend is leading them to another plantation. In a charged moment of collaborative composing, Melovee told Ellie: “Things like that happened! So yeah, I can’t be fully in their shoes. Yes, to retell history is a challenging thing. But there’s no fact that says she was a deceptive person. She went through the medical examination somehow. I don’t know how, but she did.”

A third tendency is presentism, overextending contemporary concepts that may not fit historical women “within their own cultural contexts” (76). Women’s and Gender Studies scholar David Gold describes the challenges with presentism that undergraduates identified when editing Wikipedia pages featuring women rhetors. For instance, concepts of literacy and intelligence were different for suffragette activist Carie Chapman Catt than the student writers, dissonance they had to deal with to update the Wikipedia page they were editing about Catt. But presentism doesn’t preclude contemporary engagement with women of the past. Critical imagination for Royster and Kirsch includes asking, “How do we make what was going on in their context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context?” (20).

To counter these interpretive tendencies while piecing together scant historical material, Royster and Kirsch commend the research practice of critical imagination. Critical imagination deliberately puts in conversation (a) existing historical material and (b) the interpretive meaning-making process. That is, the practice approaches drawing inferences in the face of a limited historical record to be a creative - that is *imaginative* - interpretive act; and simultaneously, an activity to conduct deliberately - *critically*. The practice puts a check on the above three tendencies through hypothesis building. In returning for this study to the Note to Visitors that accompanied the Williams panel, Melovee traced evidence of something similar afoot in her approach to Williams’s panel - afoot including in Melovee’s efforts to reframe the tendency

toward presentism (tendency 3).

Melovee's Take on Educated Guessing as a Check on Interpretive Overreach

I (Melovee) enacted my own version of critical imagination regarding Cathay Williams and tried to encourage this practice among visitors. Royster and Kirsch explain: “We use critical imagination as a tool to engage, as it were, in hypothesizing, in what might be called ‘educated guessing,’ as a means for searching methodologically, not so much for immutable truth but instead for what is likely or possible, given the facts in hand” (71). In deciding how to approach the panel, I can now see myself engaging then in what Royster and Kirsch call “educated guessing.” To start, consider this excerpt from the panel featuring Williams:

I was born in Independence, Missouri in September 1844. My father was free, but my mother and I were enslaved on the outskirts of Jefferson City, Missouri.

In 1861, around the beginning of the Civil War, Union soldiers seized the town. Although I was no longer bound to slavery at the plantation, I still had limited freedom and was forced to serve in a military support role for the Union Army.

Instead of concluding for visitors that Cathay Williams was a “rough” or “determined” woman, I invited them to construct their own representations of her character and fill in the blanks by considering the historical details that illustrate the specific contexts of her life, such as growing up in a slave environment in Mississippi, the timeline of her life story, her personal accomplishments, and challenges.

Two educated guesses then shaped much of what I wrote to follow this section of the panel. The first was geared toward the historical record itself: the wager that Williams made to survive as a newly emancipated previously enslaved person also, poignantly, took a tremendous toll on her body. In other words, her survival strategy - what she did to manage her own life - also undermined her very survival. This educated guess shows up in the following excerpt of the panel:

Williams: I didn't join the Army to become a hero, rather I did not have much coming from slavery and I needed a way to survive in society. Despite the racism and lack of proper resources, I marched through Kansas and New Mexico to be stationed at forts assigned to protect settlers.

The military took a toll on my body. ... In June 1891, I completed a pension application citing the medical disabilities caused by my military service. I suffered from neuralgia, diabetes, and all my toes were amputated. But my pension claim was rejected on February 8, 1892, alleging there was no disability present and that my service in the Army was illegal. ...

In this section of the panel, I hoped Williams's significant medical injuries, reported as a result of her military service, would speak for themselves. Likewise, the direct quote at the bottom of the panel ("I wanted to make my own living and not be dependent on relatives or friends.") stands on its own. The quote from her interview with the *St. Louis Daily Times* conveys a powerful yet plain wisdom that felt genuine, and I didn't want to stray from that.

In form and function, this first educated guess is closely tied to my second hypothesis - this one geared towards how visitors might encounter Williams (that is, encounter her Black presence) via the panel. My hunch was that visitors would be more likely to engage with Williams on her own terms if I were to craft the panel around verbs - factual actions of Williams and those actions' consequences - rather than descriptive adverbs or adjectives that suggest a judgment about her character. Consider, for example, the verbs we have underlined in the excerpt below:

Throughout the Civil War, I mostly cooked and cleaned because that was all that I was permitted to do at the time.

Five years later, on November 15, 1866, I enlisted in the U.S. Army despite the prohibition against women. I listed my name as William Cathay and told the recruiting officers that I was a 22-year-old cook. After passing a physical examination, I was determined fit for duty.

My choice of these verbs ("cooked," "cleaned," "enlisted," etc.) attempt to direct visitors to consider what "choice" may have been like for Williams. Throughout the panel, I wanted to encourage patience and attentiveness from visitors who may be hearing her story for the first time. I wanted visitors to engage with Williams's own life circumstances, rather than assuming that, as a visitor, their primary role in reading the panel is to adjudicate whether or not she should have disguised herself to join the army, or whether she deserved her pension. No need to embellish the story. It's already more than enough without sensationalizing it or romanticizing it. The panel gets people thinking, imagining and asking their own questions, What? Why? How did Williams get past the health check?

The tendency toward presentism (tendency 3) that Royster and Kirsch caution against is also a concern I addressed in the Note to Visitors for the "Meet a Buffalo Soldier" installation. Below is an excerpt from the note's section about the Williams panel. The underlined passage anticipates that some visitors may expect the museum's content designers to have interpreted Cathay Williams from a contemporary lens of gender diversity. The passage also highlights my reasons for not having done so - while also acknowledging the relevance of Williams's life story to the contemporary moment.

Note to Visitors: ... Private Cathay Williams introduces a unique perspective that challenges the limiting status quo for women and African American women in the 1860s. Her story engages in modern LGBTQ conversation by supporting the visibility of gender and sexual minorities—including transgender or questioning people. By sharing her story in the first person, there is an absence of the pronouns him or her. Whether Cathay wished to identify as a male rather than female has not been explicitly confirmed by her or in any of the research that was uncovered while writing the biography. Also, it is unlikely that she had access to concepts and terminology that supported new ways of perceiving and identifying with gender in the 1860s.

The political environment surrounding the museum heavily influenced the decision to include the note for visitors. The other designers and I recognized that many of our visitors would include legislators and interest groups involved in policy making. Given the increasing relevance of LGBTQ issues in policy and social culture, we felt it was necessary and externally valid to explicitly address how the Cathay Williams panel engages with these topics. Our goal was to provide contextual transparency regarding the use of gender in Cathay Williams's story, situating the past scenario within a present cultural understanding.

Royster and Kirsch note “the need to resist overidentification and romanticism by sustaining reflective, reflexive, dialectical, and dialogical habits of inquiry that function to keep our critical perspectives always in gear” (78). Through the Note to Visitors, I wanted visitors, likewise, “to keep” their criticality also “in gear.” But, as Royster and Kirsch insist, this criticality doesn't sanitize our relationships with the past, but rather asks us to consider more thoughtfully how and on what terms we engage with it. As Patricia Bizzell notes in the foreword to *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*: “Critical imagination’ also enables hope for the future, to visualize what could and should be and thus to find the energy to work for it” (x).

Ellie's Take on Critical Imagination Transfiguring Implication

As Rothberg's *Implicated Subjects* attests, when socio-political realities are complex, when life and death are at stake and on scale, one tendency is to draw lines, to pit us against them, and to adjudicate blame. It's tempting to seek clear lines that would somehow let ourselves off the hook and alleviate our own discomfort. Vital matters of financial reparations and land restitution fall outside the purview of this study, but the rhetorical demands of creating more just public institutions do not. In the context of the full exhibit, Melovee's “Meet a Buffalo Soldier” installation in general and the Cathay Williams's panel in particular invite visitors to open themselves to others in ways that could transfigure implication. The panels ask visitors to hold socio-political complexity in a taut but agile stance that refuses to simplify complexity by ceding to facile us-vs-them way of thinking. Melovee designed the installation to entice visitors to experience the possibility of other ways of relating. With and for young people, in particular, she holds that histories and circumstances can be complicated and troubled, and we can still recognize one another's personhood. If we can do that - if we can open ourselves to possibility with and for one another, including by creating surprising encounters

where different ways of relating are momentarily possible - then there is something about that initial encounter, that surprise, that says, *If this is momentarily possible, then such encounters, such surprises, might be momentarily possible again, and maybe for longer, and maybe more often, and maybe in ways, as these encounters do, maybe in ways that change us.* As Flower's *Outcomes of Engaged Education* reminds us, the repertoire she transformed to pull off this rhetorical feat is evidence of her rhetorical education at work.

Conclusion

Melovee's case offers rhetoric and writing studies a glimpse of the creativity, care and persistence it can take to produce a public memory site in a politically charged climate. The team's iterative design process took several years of feedback and reflection before securing final approval. The case also shows that constructing Black presence at the Arizona State Capitol Museum involves drawing visitors into the fraught systems in which Black people have sought belonging in the US and the hostilities they have encountered as a result. For instance, Melovee has Flipper speak beyond the veil to set straight the record against him: "In 1976 the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records concluded that my conviction and punishment was 'unduly harsh and unjust.' ... In 1999, I was pardoned by President Bill Clinton who recognized the injustice and acknowledged my lifetime accomplishments." And when some administrators at the museum urged eliminating Williams's panel from the installation to avoid controversy, Melovee persevered. In our walk-through interview, she recounted:

They're like, "Should we include her?"

And I'm like, "Yes. Yes."

And they're like, "Okay. But, like, do we have to?"

To which I replied, "Yes - because it's so important. It's relevant now."

The "Meet a Buffalo Soldier" installation also underscores the value of an astute working theory for undertaking such artful rhetoric. After all, the similarities between Melovee's working theory and the practice Royster and Kirsch term critical imagination aren't simply evidence of Melovee's efforts to apply their theory. Rather, what's similar are the demanding rhetorical tasks that Melovee, on the one hand, and Royster and Kirsch, on the other, gave themselves in the face of archival silences and erasures, and the rhetorical acumen they accessed to do so. Melovee's case calls learners - myself (Ellie) included - to figure out how to transform what we've done before into what we need to do now, and to develop our own critical metacognitive frameworks for doing so again.

Looking back, it's easy for me (Melovee) to see that many people who visit the Arizona State Capitol Museum may not anticipate learning about the buffalo soldiers when they first walk through the doors of Arizona's historical capitol. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois, Burrows commends revamping historically white institutions so that the people of color who enter them "may do so on their own terms ... to face a world that taxes them but with fuller and replenished selves ready for the future" (139). This is one reason why I am committed to creating Black presence in historically white institutions. Some individuals may delib-

erately seek out museums dedicated to buffalo soldiers, such as the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Houston, Texas, or the Fort Huachuca Buffalo Soldier Museum in Yuma, Arizona. However, many others may not prioritize encountering this history through specialized museum visits. Instead, they will have the opportunity to encounter this important history in broader, more mainstream institutions, like the Arizona State Capitol Museum. Exhibits like *Ready and Forward: Exploring the Legacy of the Buffalo Soldiers* makes this part of US history accessible to such visitors.

I remember being a tour guide, leading large groups of students straight to the historic House of Representatives as soon as they entered, explaining to them how Arizona became a state and who wrote its constitution. The students were often critical yet curious about our history. Were women involved? Was there slavery? Are you the president? Some days, I would be either flattered or flattened by their remarks. However, as a Black female, I understood that my professionalism in sharing this history, often for their first time, provided a new framework for children to perceive people like me as knowledgeable and powerful political figures. To some, especially the younger groups, I might as well have been the governor, had they not known any better. That is why, when writing for the Buffalo Soldier exhibit, I recognized what was immediately at stake and what I could make if I invited the youth's critical imagination to be involved - a catalyst for social change.

Developing tour paths that meet K-12 standards was a major objective of the museum, yet keeping students engaged in the tour path was often a hurdle. They engaged best when they could touch or interact with artifacts, answer hypothetical questions, and imagine themselves as part of history. While there are notable museums that create child-friendly exhibits designed for imagination, our historical museum lagged behind those modern technologies. My goal was to create an exhibit that engaged youth in a new way. I wanted children to walk through the exhibit, ask questions, and feel inspired and empowered to see themselves as part of a nation built alongside Black heroes rather than defined by Black slavery. I particularly aimed for young Black children, who were the least represented, to perceive their history on those walls from a new and more empowering perspective. Why? Because I believe change starts with the youth, they are the future of culture. Childhood experiences can shape how we mature and make adult decisions.

During my recent studies in public administration, I came across a theory that cultural change often precedes policy change. In other words, cultural shifts are the first indicators of potential policy changes and, therefore, a potential positive impact. The museum, situated in a space relevant to policy creation, ironically highlights how close culture and policy are. I'm not claiming that this exhibit will directly change policy or become a major cultural phenomenon; its potential impact is more subtle. If a few students remember walking through it and feel inspired to contribute to something bigger than themselves, it can shape an entire generation. You see, these Black students, who might otherwise feel unsure of their place among their peers, can see themselves as makers of American history. In such cases, policy change becomes possible.

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