

## Activity 3 Worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Agency and Resistance

In history, “agency” refers to the power of individuals and groups to enact or exercise power, shaping their own lives and the course of society and history. Human agency is always limited by social and material constraints, and it is more limited for marginalized people who experience exclusion, discrimination, and hardship. However, although power is unequal and some people’s choices are more constrained than others, people find ways to exercise agency within their structural circumstances.

“Resistance” is a form of agency that challenges these power structures. Resistance can range from bold and overt, like violence or organized protests, to small-scale and covert, like individual acts of disobedience or defying authority.

### Reading Against the Grain

Because power is unequal, historians’ access to people’s experiences and perspectives is also unequal. Not everyone had the same ability, time, and resources to document their experiences, and not every piece of writing, artwork, or other form of expression has been preserved for future generations. Traditionally, the works of wealthier and more socially empowered individuals were the ones deemed worthy of saving and maintaining.

So when historians don’t have access to documentation left behind by marginalized groups or individuals, how do they “recover” evidence of agency and resistance? In some cases, historians turn to oral traditions, narratives passed down through generations of families and communities. Historians also examine sources left behind by other, typically more empowered, people. Most of the time, however, the authors of these sources were not trying to faithfully record the actions and experiences of the people they wrote about; they had their own motives and perspectives. Historians must read these sources “against the grain,” meaning that they don’t simply take the author at their word but employ a critical lens.

Reading against the grain involves closely examining both what the author says and what they don’t say: What assumptions does the author make? What does this tell me about the author’s thoughts and biases? What contradictions does the source raise? What claims might be disputed? What are the limits of this source? What does this source not tell me?

### Recovering Agency at the 1893 World’s Fair

For this exercise, you will read various newspaper excerpts about Indigenous performers at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. Most of these performers did not leave behind

written records or other physical objects documenting their experiences. To recover evidence of their agency and resistance, you'll need to read these excerpts against the grain.

Agency and resistance to colonialism/imperialism took many forms at the exposition:

- Negotiating for better pay or working conditions
- Speaking out against mistreatment or inequality
- Resisting assimilation pressures by preserving cultural traditions and a sense of community/kinship
- Defying expectations of “savagery” or backwardness by engaging with new technologies and aspects of modernity
- Returning the “colonial gaze” (the power of dominant cultures to scrutinize and judge other cultures) with their own critical or humorous observations

In the left column, write down quotes or examples from the excerpts that demonstrate agency/resistance. In the right column, explain how each example demonstrates agency/resistance.

Quote/Example	Explanation
