Preliminary Project Proposal:

The specific aspect of slavery I want to engage with is the idea of social mobility. I want to investigate how difficult it was for different groups of people from different time periods to move upward in society. Slavery was institutional and cruel, and it took away the freedom of the enslaved people, much less allow them to move upward in society.

I see social mobility as a contemporary legacy because slavery was only around 150 years ago, while the Jim Crow laws persisted until around 50 years ago, so in reality, institutional inequality was present not too long ago. The result of centuries of slavery and the cruel treatment of enslaved people, consisting of the African Americans and Native Americans, has long lasting effects till this day. There is a reason behind the socioeconomic divide and occupation differences among different racial groups.

Some questions I plan to investigate include the following. How did the overall social mobility for marginalized communities like African Americans and Native Americans change from around 1800 to the present age? What metrics and statistical tools can we use to measure this idea of social mobility and its change? How can we put context to the numbers we get and not merely take the results from the data as absolute facts?

Though I'm not sure exactly which primary sources I will be using for my research I do have a general sense of which sources I could use. I could use statistics and data reports examining a variety of factors measuring the socioeconomic status of people from the 1800s to the present age. I could also use personal stories and testimonies from marginalized communities, describing their situation in life and their perspective of movement in society, from the 1800s to the present age to incorporate more nuanced ideas.

Ultimately, I want to use my mathematical and statistical knowledge to come up with a quantitative measurement of the statistical mobility for the marginalized communities that were once enslaved from the 1800s to the present age and also utilize a variety of primary sources that include both data and anecdotal evidence.

Feedback:

Leo, I really love the idea of using your mathematical skills to help you work through some of these questions. First, I'd think about setting some broad limits on the project. Since we're talking about the legacies of slavery, it's probably best to focus specifically on Black people's social mobility. Then, there's the question of chronology. I'd suggest beginning at the end of slavery. That's technically 1865, but 1870 was the first census after slavery ended and was significant because it's the first where we have full demographic data for formerly enslaved people. Of course things aren't so simple—information on free Black people before 1870 was recorded in earlier censuses, but that made up a small percentage of total Black people in the U.S. and adds a layer of complexity that I think is unnecessary here. Then there's the question of place. In theory you could limit yourself to the South or the former Confederacy, but given how important migration outside of the South has been to Black upward mobility, I think limiting yourself to the South would skew your results and not produce good data. So, this leaves us with tracing social mobility among Black people across the United States from 1870-present. Now, this is just a baseline—as you begin collecting data, you might decide it makes sense to narrow this down for any number of reasons. The sources that immediately come to mind are the US Census, because it contains income data, and Department of Labor records for things like unemployment rates. I imagine there's a decent amount of secondary literature on this topic to explore, as well as studies that might serve as an example of how to use statistical data to make historical arguments (you might check out Thomas Picketty's Capital, which is very data-driven). All of this said, I'm not a quantitative social scientist, and so this is definitely something to check in with a librarian about (maybe the economics subject specialist?). You should also think about what raw data can't convey, such as personal stories, and think about how to incorporate that type of evidence, especially when it seems to contradict the data (i.e., how do we make sense of people feeling like they're doing better or worse than they actually are according to the data?) Feel free to reach out if you want to chat about your idea in more detail; I think this could be really great!