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Public Humanities for Indigenous Presence and (Ancient) Pasts

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the issue of Native American history and periodization where we are not allowed “premodern” histories. History prior to European contact is relegated to terms like “Pre-Columbian” and consigned to the domain of archeologists. As a reclamation of Native sovereign ancestral presence, I am interested in public humanities as an interdisciplinary way to push against the myths and stereotypes that both confine Indigenous people to static pasts, either displacing ancestors into settler national memory or oblivion. My goals in public humanities are to work toward reclamations of ancient pasts in the so-called Americas from the limited imaginations of settler skull- and arrowhead-collectors toward reasserting the ongoing lived relationships that Natives have with spaces condemned as ruins and materials as relics. I briefly mention my own work in digital curation, *Red Coral Stories*, to provide counternarratives from European conquest toward expanding Native American presence across space and time.

Keywords: museums; Native American History; public history; public humanities

How I became an emerging scholar of public humanities involves an assortment of disciplines and degrees, and my six-year commitment to an outdated exhibit space. As an undergraduate, I spent my time between comparative literature and anthropology majors, both of which were satisfying my interests in the humanities, but my other occupation was a mural that I kept coming back to in the upper floor gallery space of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology’s *Peoples of the Southwest* permanent exhibition. This mural is a simple landscape with a few animals and plants in a mountainous desert range, not to be confused with the recently painted over controversial, due to its sensitive religious nature, replica of a kiva mural on the other side of this gallery. I am not sure when exactly I came across the small museum tucked into a corner of the University of New Mexico’s campus. While I could not easily define myself, a mixed/white second-generation urban Native (Diné) student who kept taking Latin classes while also studying cultural anthropology, the landscape mural was a constant and kept me thinking about the cycles between past and present and the overall continuous presence of people’s relationships to that landscape. I had no coursework that spoke to it. It was not about literature, ancient or modern, nor was there anything in anthropology that quite spoke to reading this relationship as history – only as archeology, which I only somewhat studied with my concentration in ethnology.

What brought me to public history, ultimately, was the question of where to find this history. Throughout my undergrad, I was motivated to continue with school – but there was the question of where to fit with my divided disciplinary track. A program where I could combine and explore my two interests, the short-lived accelerated Masters in comparative humanities at Brandeis University, seemed the place to continue that personal inquiry. This resulted in a capstone piece in classical reception, where I grew my interests in feminist and medical anthropology – but was more distant than ever from what I sought in the space of the *Peoples of the Southwest* exhibition. Or, in particular, the mural in the surrounding gallery space that had somewhat come to feel like a nonprimary home. There were also the cases of pottery. Over the past decade, the cases with those ceramics have seen increasing vacancies as provenance becomes a more pressing question. The mural is situated between millennia-old yucca sandals – “ancient flip flops,” as we docents would tell visiting school group kids, a spear and atlatl display, and Paleo-Indian flint points: Clovis and Folsom, as one would expect, as well as a controversial Sandia point,¹ which we never discussed in tours and could easily be missed in the display case. Further on, the exhibit space progresses through a timeline from pit house to Chaco Canyon Greathouse along a dated narrative of linear cultural evolutionary progress. Various items accompany each of the backdrops illustrating this transition, but those sections were less interesting to me. Even further on, the gallery space would end with a brief note on Athabaskan – Apache and Navajo (latecomers) – at least, late according to limited archeological studies. And with that, the exhibition abruptly ends. That was it for the precontact ancient peoples of the Southwest. The stories I sought were close at hand, but not quite present.

And perhaps, it was that tantalizing taste and what was left to the imagination that kept me working there. I would have been just a spectator, but I remained a student docent and summer camp counselor well past my time as an undergraduate, partly to keep my momentum through the inert space. I left for Brandeis University thinking that would be my last summer at the Maxwell, but I returned the following summer, no longer a student. While working as a political organizer and receptionist at a disability law firm, I continued to do tours as my availability allowed. Tours at the Maxwell are almost entirely fueled by school groups visiting. Elementary students, predominantly, with the occasional middle school, high school, or preschool group. There were things we stressed to students such as change and continuity over time and continued Native presence to today, but it was our lessons with hands-on materials, including ethnographic historic photos, that were our only tools for imparting these lessons alongside the dated material that clung to a fixed archeological narrative. Part of the exhibit is about the history of UNM’s archeological field school featuring a multilayered near life-sized diorama of a dig site, which both intrigued and puzzled many kids. This section requires an explanation of its stratigraphic layers representing multiple eras of site occupation. This multilayered occupation includes the “modern-day” archeologists’ impositions, their tools and grid-mapping stakes, and strings covering the excavation, where the dig site itself shows some dated archeological techniques. In addition to pointing to the different “clues” left in different layers, we could explain that even the archeologists’ layer of occupation was representative of change over time, but it was a struggle to impart that narrative to some audiences where there were both so many details and not enough to convey this from the diorama. Especially where it all seemed so neat and fed into the cultural evolution narrative laid out in the exhibit space of the floor above this display. I knew this past was richer and fuller of complex stories, but my less than 90, sometimes as short as 45–60 minutes with students meant there could only be a limited deviation from the way the exhibition guided us through time.

¹ See Preston 1995.

I thought curatorial work would be the answer, but my training remained uneven. While still working with the Maxwell Museum's educator, more or less working through the scripted curriculum, I got a glimpse of the curatorial research side of things. This introductory hands-on training ran almost in stark contrast to my reading-based coursework on museums and community collaboration. The museum's ethnology department tasked me with research for accessioning a collection that consisted mainly of baskets donated by the late heir to a chemist who came to New Mexico to work on the Manhattan project and built his interest in Southwest Native arts from there. I spent a school year piecing together these baskets' pasts to create mere short notes in their catalog entries, only to relegate them to too-packed shelves where baskets were already getting stacked in the overcrowded basement storage of the museum. I did not feel great about having to leave them there like that. I worked in isolation on my accessioning tasks, only occasionally consulting with the curators. It was just me, the baskets, and all the other materials stored away from their communities. As I got to know the baskets in the silence, I felt worse about being there. More recently, the Maxwell Museum organized the exhibition *Conversing with the Land*,² which saw at least one basket that I accessioned, as well as others from its extensive collection, on display in an exhibition that finally brought together community members and better realized the baskets' stories and relational land connections. I had already moved on from working with the museum and did not get to be a part of that meaningful work. During my work in the collections, it occurred to me that there was so much in that space that I could not know. As in, there was too much knowledge that was meant for the intimate relationships of others – and it was overwhelming to think a single person or institution would hunger to have so much. And as I was encouraged to work in the museum's set typologies, I felt myself being typologized in relation to expertise labels amid the materials with which I aspired to connect.

Disciplinary confines seem to specify that I could only learn the stories showcased upstairs in the *Peoples of the Southwest* exhibition had I been an archeologist studying archeological artifacts. Yet, the main intent of my ongoing research pursuits is to not view artifacts as *artifacts*, objects, or relics – but as significant material forms with a continuous history. It has become an ongoing point for me to say, “I’m not an archeologist, but...” But I have only worked with ancient materials as an educator, a docent. Which does not lend to the expertise distinction for material labeled “archeological.” Still, my work has relevance to the conversation. All along, I wanted to work with the ancient past in consideration of how it forms and informs people’s perceptions today. The most established avenue that I have found for this work is through classical reception. I am not a classicist, as much as I have enjoyed returning to ancient Roman erotic poetry and other cultural manifestations. I continued taking so much Latin it was almost half my nonrequired coursework in museum studies. I justified doing so through a project based partially in classical reception, though it was overall less important to my Master’s thesis which was, more importantly, about Native materials ending up in museums and issues with how they are still referenced and typologized. It was working on my first M.A. degree in comparative humanities that I fell into the trap of classical reception scholarship, and I have never properly emerged. At the time, my MACH program advisor told me that I should not consider pursuing history. He saw my work as “too presentist.” I had the conundrum of knowing my work was too steeped in questions about relationships to the *ancient* past to belong in a cultural studies program. I figure most American cultural studies tracks do not care about ancient peoples, classical or otherwise.

² Maxwell Museum 2023.

My next project became entirely too focused on untangling the dominance of classical pasts, a project I still have not abandoned – but this was never the ancient past with which I wanted to maintain connections, when I kept coming back to the Maxwell for research and tours. Latin classes are readily available, as are opportunities for classical reception. Even while studying in the anthropology department at the University of New Mexico, an institution central to the study of the American Southwest, I found hardly any opportunity to learn about ancient Indigenous pasts in a fulfilling way. I self-studied outside of set coursework as I spent time with the *Peoples of the Southwest*. I struggled with the natural history/art divide that surrounded Native American materials, particularly those of the Southwest which I wanted to become better familiar with. This struggle lies in the division of materials as institutions situate them differently through established fields, whether anthropological or art historical. On the one side of this categorization, archeological designations and outdated terminology, such as “ancestral Puebloan,” frame the *Peoples of the Southwest* exhibition’s material culture. The “ancestral Pueblo” label, while a step away from the even more problematic misuse of the Diné term that became “Anasazi” culture still homogenizes many ethnic connections and erases many Native peoples’ own language and connection to ancestors.³ Looking instead to contemporary art canon and even categorization as “historic,” I see materials face commodifying objectification that comes with art museums’ and collectors’ consumption of Native art. Indigenous meaning is significant for authenticity purposes in the art world, but the capitalistic nature of authenticity displaces and alienates Native art from source communities. These categorical issues ultimately came into to the archeology versus ethnology divide at the Maxwell Museum. I usually taught public audiences with ancient or “archeological” materials in the exhibition space and with teaching collections which largely consisted of replicas, but downstairs, as a researcher with an ethnology background, I worked in the ethnographic collections.

If I were to become an ethnologist, something which at this point I have decidedly not been despite even two degrees’ worth of graduate-level anthropology coursework, I have an interest in the ethnology of peoples’ relations to ancient pasts. From the perspective of becoming a historian, I might consider this work not as ethnography per se, but as a study of the reception of ancient or “premodern” times – where colonial encounters lurk in setting this ancient versus modern periodization. But, in truth, all *study* of the past – ancient or not – is its reception. Even if it does not have a label on it. At the same time, studying in itself is still distancing and different from coming to know intimate relationships in embodying the past. This more embodied knowledge may better resemble praxis or some form of lived experience. I value praxis as a form of relational enactment, not merely the participant observation of an ethnographer. I still seek to define this praxis as whatever dimensions of bringing my isolated existential inquiries out of the museum’s basement, out of its vitrines, and out of my head, might look like in community-based work. I know well how far some ethnographers have gone beyond mere participant observation into collaborative models, but still, I could not commit to the field that brought about the terms and tensions that I could not make sense of from within.

On the other side of my museum studies training, I found myself more distant from the field of anthropology. I have not taken an anthropology course since graduating the University of New Mexico for a second time, though I do sometimes miss it. Especially linguistic anthropology. I have devoted myself instead to learning how to become a public historian. The advice that I once received to *not* become a historian still haunts me with the doubt that I

³ Childs 2005.

am not a proper historian either. Internal to the field of public history is the question of service. Is it service to a government, a corporation, or another public? As we are often reminded at UC Santa Barbara, an emphasis on serving even corporations (outside of universities, which can resemble one), was a major aim as highlighted by the foundational Robert Kelley.⁴ More recently, the aims of my colleagues, and reflected in various publications between NCPH's History@Work column and *The Public Historian* seek out a more community-driven work as public history.⁵ This is what I thought I was coming into by taking on a new disciplinary degree and leaving home for the longest period of my life so far. Five years later, restricted by the ongoing pandemic, I also grow more distant from the communities that I wish to serve. I am not alone in salvaging my education in the middle of a global pandemic. I can also say that my experience at my current university has also involved community building: between three academic worker strikes and being a part of a collective effort to continue and institutionally substantiate American Indian and Indigenous Studies at UCSB, I have been part of community-driven work. But those efforts do not have to do with my dissertation or the title that may be on this final degree. I write about anthropology collecting and its history through a scattered set of archival sources, two collections from a short in-person trip and the rest from what I could gather online and through books – all that I have been able to access so far amid the increasing barriers that have arisen with COVID. I have not gotten to spend time working with material collections, as I had planned when I left my hometown with aspirations that I could travel widely for the first time in my life. I am even isolated from the materials that kept me company in my secluded research in the Maxwell collections.

What about digital accessibility? I do still appreciate that the digital humanities can be a form of engaging with wide publics in an accessible manner. This is why I worked on an accompanying digital exhibition that is a part of my ongoing dissertation work. For *Red Coral Stories*, I recruited a set of Native artists at different stages of their art careers to speak to themes of connectivity between the U.S. Southwest as Native space and the ancient Mediterranean in multiple material forms.⁶ This is to counter hegemonic classicisms and one-sided conquest narratives of Eurocentric Western traditions toward more meaningful and complex relationships between peoples and cultural exchange. I made some wonderful connections with the set of participating artists. I will take those valuable insights with me. It was also a daunting experience because I realized that I did not have as many connections as I needed. I am not someone with a large platform as some public-facing scholars have amassed. I would differentiate public-facing scholarship, as in being an authoritative scholar speaking to a wide public audience, from doing work that directly serves and/or collaborates with public audiences, though there sometimes can overlap.⁷

Much as I am not an archeologist or (museum) anthropologist, I am not an art historian or art critic either. I have engaged extensively with Native arts in my research, writing, and teaching and I see it as a way for people to learn from Native culture and history in a way that is at least more ethical than hoarding poorly provenanced artifacts and the spoils of ethnographic salvage in basements with little storage space remaining, far from the peoples who know their material stories. I have no formal training in art history, not even in the Western “classical” or “fine” arts – both designations that my work brings into question. Paying close attention to the work of Kent Monkman has been a major basis in my art history

⁴ See Kelley 1978.

⁵ A few favorite recent examples include Cadmus 2024, Tang 2023, Acemah and Qannik Glenn 2022.

⁶ Lovely 2023.

⁷ Brown 2023.

education. Monkman is a Cree artist who melds contemporary and European fine art traditions to subvert colonial ethnographic gazing and myths of Native vanishment from history and space.⁸ I also read him in a broader range of contemporary Native arts, which I have managed largely through internet databases and catalogues when I can manage to buy or purchase the pricey art books or else obtain them through the library.

Except for the Maxwell Museum, and other museums in my hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico, my experiences in museums have been only brief glimpses in person. Still, it was at the Maxwell that I was able to catch glimpses of the visions that I have held for my work. At UC Santa Barbara, I have designed courses on Native American history because they were not being offered and had not been part of the curriculum since the summer prior to my matriculation in 2019. Still, these courses as designated in the university's catalogue, are based on periods in U.S. history and do not afford attention prior to European contact. I am not sure if any universities offer courses outside of their archeology departments which pay attention to earlier history across North America, and if there are, I am sure those courses are few and far between. I also mean more substantial narratives beyond focus on scattered archeological points of interest – based mostly on a few civilizations and centering empire. A world history course might regard the so-called pre-Columbian Western hemisphere as consisting of few scattered sites outside of the empires of South America and Mesoamerica, such as Poverty Point, Cahokia, and perhaps Chaco Canyon's Great Houses.⁹ This was an ancient history defined through limited imaginations that seats its fascinations with ruins within an othering ethnographic gaze. Indigenous presence and history on these continents and their surrounding islands is erased through civilizational hierarchies created by those who later selectively salvaged from the destruction of their settlements. In the midst of this ongoing epistemicide, I have wished for richer stories, like I could learn in my Latin, Classics, and other comparative literature coursework from undergraduate. These stories are not just from the literature; rather, there are other literature studies which can be relevant in the humanities.

When I was drawn to the mural at the Maxwell Museum, sequestered in a building on the campus that is squarely centered in a mid-sized city, I did not know about land-based pedagogy and listening to the land as formally articulated approaches. These have both been central to conversations in my extracurricular education with the American Indian and Indigenous Collective at UCSB. The anthropology museum on campus held the promise of embodied learning and relationality with landscapes – but it is also a secluded and quiet (when there are no large school groups) space, static, and near lifeless, outside of the painted stills on the wall and the ancient materials stuck in place behind glass. The second-floor windowless gallery, or the basement two levels below, makes one feel especially distant from the plants, animals, stone, and clay from which the items took their forms, and the rigid archeological labels render them even more remote from the people whose hands first held them. The docent narrative for engaging students with the mural is still imperfect, premised on the idea of how to *use* the land, but there is still the potential to use the mural to think of living *in relation* with what it depicts, which is what I was sitting there imagining all along. I worked on mini-lessons on plants as medicine, based on Maxwell's teaching collection as

⁸ Madill and Monkman 2022.

⁹ An essay by Wong (2024) exemplifies this shortcoming in attempts by non-Indigenous premodernist scholars who “discover” these few North American sites/civilizations as part of globalizing or diversifying their empire-centric canons for teaching. Despite its brief mention of the relevance of the present and a few tribes today, Wong's essay insists on outdated extinction (rooted in 19th century Vanishing Race Theory) and does not sufficiently bring in still-living connections between present Indigenous communities who challenge that distancing narrative.

well as cave art for their *Ancestors* exhibition, but I never got to demonstrate those topics while the demand was normally for the school tour. The Maxwell Museum is gradually bringing changes to its permanent exhibitions, which I catch glimpses of in my rare visits back home. My time there, six years starting when I volunteered as a docent, concluded when I left for California to become a public historian. Or, if not a historian properly, a scholar committed to public humanities in whatever disciplinary form. I may not be an archeologist, art historian, or museum anthropologist, but I still aspire to work with publics on these important and long-silenced stories. I know the silence in those spaces well, as both comforting and haunting.

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