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Ephemeral Encounters and Material Evidence

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Ephemeral Encounters and Material Evidence

Council for Museum Anthropology

Margaret Bruchac

In 2016, the American Philosophical Society Museum in Philadelphia opened a new exhibition curated by Diana Marsh and Lynnette Regouby, titled "Gathering Voices: Thomas Jefferson and Native America." Writing from my perspective as an advisor to that exhibition, I share some reflections on the challenges of interpreting Indigenous traditions captured in colonial collections.

Material Evidence

In 1791, Thomas Jefferson collected a brief "Vocabulary of the Unquachog Indians" from two elderly Native women in Long Island. That document, written in his own hand, is currently on display at the APS Museum.

Excerpt from the vocabulary of the Unquachog (Unkechaug) Indians, collected by Thomas Jefferson, Long Island, 1791. Photo courtesy American Philosophical Society

This worn piece of paper is a rare survivor from a much larger endeavor: Jefferson's thirty-year-long attempt to survey the Indigenous languages spoken on the North American continent. He compiled word lists from fifty distinct Native languages, but the collection was destroyed when an entire trunk of documents was broken open by a thief and scattered into the waters of the James River, after having been revealed to contain nothing of monetary value. In an 1806 letter to Levett Harris, Jefferson noted, "Some leaves floated ashore and were found in the mud; but these were...so defaced by mud and water that no general use can ever be made of them." Take a moment of silence to consider the immensity of that loss.

Now, take a breath and reconsider. As tragic as those drowned documents might appear, they were little more than words on paper. They were not sacred texts, ritual formulas, or treaty records. Nor were they accurate records of linguistic relations. Jefferson noted that the Unquachog dialect resembled the tongues spoken by both Shinnecock and Montauk people, but (he asserted) they could "barely understand each other." Clearly, something was lost in translation.

Jefferson solicited Indigenous equivalents for 250 English words covering what he believed to be universal human utterances: nouns referring to body parts, kin, and the natural world, and verbs describing human actions. What resulted was a highly selective sampling, organized in an idiosyncratic manner. The first three words on the list—cow, horse, sheep—represented invasive European species that were identified (logically) by most Native people using loan words: "*cowses, horses, sheeps*." There are Unquachog words for whale and whale oil (*púttap* and *púttapapúm*), perhaps because harvesting this resource had become a profitable European industry, but there are no references to other Indigenous hunting (*peénsaac*), or to any associated ritual practices. There are words for war (*ayutowac*) and peace (*weéhsaac*), but none for healing, diplomacy, or condolence. A collection like this represents the Euro-centric interests of the collector, more than the Indigenous thought-worlds of the collected.

Ephemeral Encounters

Consider what else is missing. What were the names of the people who answered these odd queries from Euro-American strangers? How did they conceptualize human and other-than-human kin and relationships? How else can we illuminate those encounters? Does the emphasis upon material records skew our understandings of the ephemeral?

Inevitably, curators place intense emphasis on the preservation of tangible, written evidence, and they are inclined to fetishize and preserve materials that seem iconic—a uniquely surviving document, painting, photograph, object—especially when those materials rest in their own repository. Yet, when archival institutions strive to represent the Indigenous past, there will always be limitations.

Linguistic documents, even at their best, are disembodied records, separated from the living gestures and speech acts of the beings who created them. Early explorers, ethnographers and historians valiantly attempted to capture Indigenous data and languages, but the evidence that survives is always partial. Each document is rather like a small puzzle piece out of a much larger picture. If we look closely, perhaps we can tell that this piece appears to be part of something larger, but to what else is it attached, to whom else does it refer? How do audiences relate to it? Why is it so evocative?

Curators are often inclined to make authoritative statements and assert what we "know." A more realistic approach could be to admit what we do *not* know. Colonial documents, preserved in their handsome frames, might be seen as small windows into the ephemeral past. We stand here, looking through these windows, waiting for potential Indigenous informants to walk by. If they stop to engage with us (or with those who came before us), and become, in doing so, our interlocutors, there is our snapshot. The material evidence has been successfully captured, but outside of that window, those people have moved on, out of our view. They belong to larger communities and places that we cannot see or experience. So, we do our best to extrapolate from the material in hand.

Re-Visioning the Collection

With these limitations in mind, how can we move towards more holistic representations, and more collaborative approaches, and away from the fetishization of material collections? We must, I suggest, encourage our audiences to think beyond the frame, to envision larger communities beyond the boundaries of the museum. It seems important to remember that the collecting of Indigenous material was, at the outset, a colonial project. Indigenous and European relationships and beliefs were, inevitably and imperfectly, encoded in and shaped by written documents. If we re-examine the surviving material and ephemeral evidence with that in mind, we might better understand the conflicts that emerged when one side sought to forge new collaborative relationships that would preserve Indigenous landscape, while the other side sought to claim and dominate that same space.

In addition, by inviting Native American people of the present into the museums, into the archives, and into the conversation, we can rebuild the living relationships between voices from the past and contemporary Indigenous communities. Instead of using our imaginations to rebuild the entire trunkful of documents that comprised Jefferson's Native collection, we might consider other restorative projects. We might see our way clear to re-conceptualizing the vast array of Native languages spoken across the continent from Indigenous perspectives, while extricating our thoughts from the mud of the colonial past.

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