

AAD 630: Preliminary Research Methods Proposal

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Museum studies is my focus within arts and administration, although I am aware that my entire cohort will wind up with the same degree of arts management. As I am also pursuing a concurrent degree in Folklore, my research interests are interdisciplinary and broad. Piecing down my research topic is a difficult task, but writing a proposal about the research methods I hope to use is one way to think about paring it down. The purpose of this proposal is, then, to use my rough draft of a research question to explore how I would try to answer this question using three separate research methods: case studies, ethnographic fieldwork, and theoretical analysis. It is a focus of how I *would* as opposed to how I *will*.

The research question I have chosen to address in this proposal is my attempt to bridge multiple interests. I wish to connect my museum studies focus with my interest in concepts and constructs of value, authenticity, place, and authority. I will likely explore classes in community arts as well to enrich my public folklore tract in the Folklore masters program. Museum studies has been a little trapped on the binary between focusing on objects or focusing on visitors. I will admit to a bias towards a visitor-focused museum, but that is a paradigm shift that has been occurring for several years in museology. Instead of taking a side (object/visitor), I propose to focus on the relationship between museums and community. I believe that museums can contribute to community cultural development and that they can, as third places, serve as building blocks for communities. My research question, therefore, is: how can museums help displaced or historically disenfranchised persons connect to and build (or rebuild) communities? I will explore this question as it

relates to three research methods: case studies, ethnographic fieldwork, and theoretical analysis (literature review).

The problem statement that this question comes from is not an easy one to condense. In my classes, readings, and experiences I have noticed that there are issues, both historically and now, in how museums represent culture. To expand on that, my main interest is in looking at how museums can build a better framework for culturally relevant representation. This is not tied to just museums of cultural or natural history, but also to art museums, ethnographic museums, and historical society museums. This has, in many ways and by many museums, already been addressed, but there is still a long way to go concerning best practices.

Truncated Literature Review

This project requires a hefty portion of literature review. My sources are combined from foundational theory, case studies (and case study analyses), and ethnographic work. I am working mainly with qualitative data. My sources include *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* edited by Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* by Steven Conn, the chapter “Museums and Controversy” from Mike Wallace’s book *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, “The 95 percent solution: school is not where most Americans learn most of their science” by Lynn D. Dierking and John H. Falk, “California’s Sites of Conscience: An Analysis of the State’s Historic Mission Museums” by Deana Dartt, *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and the Museum* by Kate Sturge. John H. Falk’s *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, Nina Simon’s book *The Participatory Museum*, “The Cultural Politics of ‘Community’ and

Citizenship in the District 6 Museum, Cape Town” by Christiaan Beyers, and Ray Oldenberg’s *The Great Good Place*, as well as others.

Deana Dartt’s work is crucial to my project and her article contains a critical investigation of the California Historic Mission Museums and how they present history. Her overall takeaway is positive; she is arguing that there are many possibilities for the Mission Museum system to use their given authority for purposes that benefit communities and contribute to a healing of historic injustices. There is a separation, Dartt argues, between scholarly critique of misrepresentation and how public history venues continue to represent the past. As Dartt’s article shows, representation is about authority, not authenticity. Of the 21 California Mission Museums, 17 are owned and operated by “the local Catholic diocese of the area or the Franciscan Order and have active churches with parishioners and attending priests” (Dartt, p. 98). The church is not likely to use its authority over these historic sites and museums to critique itself. This is problematic, because a falsified image of California history is being shared instead of an accurate, inclusive picture of what really happened.

Dartt sees this in the way that exhibitions are designed, with limited information about Native Americans and usually either an erasure narrative that falsely depicts Native Americans as a disappearing culture, or a progress narrative that starts Californian history at the point of European contact. The identity of “Californian” is not inclusive, and Mission Museums have perpetuated the historic pattern of excluding and hiding uncomfortable history from their visitors. Dartt uses site visits, ethnographic observation, participate observation, theoretical analysis, and literature review as research methods in her article. She also offers suggestions to the Mission Museum system, and suggests feasible ways in

which they can move away from misrepresentation and towards an authentic narrative. Dartt explicitly states that “mission museums can (and have the ethical responsibility to) alter this grim narrative with a commitment to work as a source of community cohesion” (Dartt, p. 106). Dartt ends the article with a long list of ways in which the California Mission Museums can approach altering the dominant narrative present in exhibits. Her list will be instrumental in informing the best practices guidelines I hope to create. In constructing my research proposal, I will use Zina O’Leary’s book *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project* to help inform my research methods and tools.

Methodological Design

To pursue this project I would rely on three primary research methods: case studies, ethnographic fieldwork, and theoretical analysis. I will review each method, discuss limitations, selection criteria, and potential issues, and explore potential research tools.

Case Study

Case studies, which O’Leary defines in the singular as “a method of studying elements of our social fabric through comprehensive description and analysis of a single situation or case” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 347), serve my interests as a primary method. Case studies are integral to actually exploring the research question I posited as the thesis for this proposal. I mentioned that looking at best practices for institutional cultural relevancy in representation is a goal for my research project. This involves ethnographic fieldwork with the communities in question, but also a case study analysis of museums that are doing a good (or bad) job. With case studies, I can attempt to answer “how?” and “why?” questions,

leading to a richer understanding of my research topic and providing evidence that may (or may not) support my findings.

Discussion

The District 6 Museum in Cape Town, South Africa is a fantastic example of a museum as third place creating a platform for community healing. As Christiaan Beyers mentions in his article “The Cultural Politics of ‘Community’ and Citizenship in the District Six Museum, Cape Town,” the District 6 Museum “prides itself on being a ‘community-museum,’ first and foremost dedicated to those who suffered the trauma of being forcibly removed from District Six as a result of past laws and practices of racial discrimination” (Beyers, 2008, p. 359). This museum actively pursues its third place-ness, using its position to instigate community healing and rebuilding.

The California Mission Museums, conversely, have hidden hard truths about the past of Native Americans in California. Junipero Serra is often revered in California for creating the Missions. He is seen as a harbinger of the Christian faith and a respected historical figure. I have also heard him described otherwise, namely by Deana Dartt and Jon Erlandson, as “an architect of genocide.” This is only one example of how hard truths are often hidden in California Mission Museums. Deana Dartt’s article on the California Mission Museums mentions a tendency to hide items and objects in the exhibits, “I found stone mortars and pestles on the floor or on dusty shelves, notoriously unlabeled and unattributed, whereas items representing the church or non-Indian inhabitants of the mission are often sealed for protection in well-lit cases and at eye level, a form of exhibition that privileges those materials over others.” (Dartt, p. 98). Dartt argues that change is

necessary in these institutions, and that the California Mission Museums have an ethical obligation to change the way they represent Native cultures and history.

With just these two examples, the District 6 Museum and the California Mission Museums, I have information about a museum that tries to build and rebuild a sense of community and compare it to a string of museums that ignores the true cultural history of people it represents. Geographically, these two museum systems are vast distances apart. Pinpointing the museums I plan to look at will be primarily informed by the case study analyses of leaders in the field of institutional cultural relativism and community engagement, like Deana Dartt. Who is incorporating multiple voices in their exhibitions? How can other museums learn from these initiatives?

Limitations definitely exist in the form of access. While it is easy enough to travel to a few of the California Mission Museums, and not out of the question to hit all of them, visiting the District 6 Museum in Cape Town, South Africa is another matter. Access to the museum itself would not provide difficult if traveling to Cape Town was more feasible. Interviewing staff (or even audience members) would also prove difficult, especially with the California Mission Museums. Institutions are likely unwilling to discuss poor practices. I would need to refine my selection criteria, deciding on which museums to use in my case study with a stronger reasoning than intrinsic interest or bias. I could edit down my cases by choosing museums with Native American exhibitions on the west coast, such as the California Mission Museums and the Portland Art Museum. It would also be possible to meet with tribal leaders in San Diego, California, where I am from, to discuss their viewpoints. The Barona reservation, for example, has their own cultural center created and run by tribal members.

Tools

Case studies incorporate many research tools, including but not limited to direct observation, in-depth interviews, quantitative and/or qualitative data analysis, documentation, and even physical artifacts. Direct observation would be the most manageable tool, especially because physical presence at the museums in my case study would be ideal. Not all museums allow for photography, but students are often granted photo passes for projects. A possible way to evaluate and compare how culturally relevant they are would be documenting the exhibitions that strongly correlate with cultural representation and comparing label text and artifacts with written literature on the subject (Deana Dartt's suggestions, primarily).

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Based on O'Leary's book, I feel like I am cheating by including ethnographic fieldwork as one method. She defines ethnography as "the study of cultural groups in a bid to understand, describe and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants" (O'Leary, 2014, p. 133). While this definition describes the goal of ethnographic fieldwork, it says very little about the process. Ethnographic fieldwork contains within it other methods, like interviews, participant observation, and observation. On top of that, ethnography also has a theoretical literature spanning several disciplines. My ethnographic knowledge is influenced and informed by folklore and anthropology, where ethnographic research is, ideally, reciprocal and culturally relevant. Ethnography is, indeed, about the participants and—dare I say—informants in question. Etymologically, ethnography is literally "writing culture/people/folk" (Ethnography). O'Leary further defines ethnographic fieldwork by saying that it "explores a way of life from the point of view of its participants and tries to

avoid assessing a culture using pre-existing frames of reference of from a particular worldview” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 133). Ethnography is an explorative research process, not a judgement or analysis of culture. I am interested in incorporating personal narratives into my future research project, although fitting it into an “understanding the problem” research question might prove challenging. If my research interests were to span multiple approaches, i.e. “understanding the problem” to “finding a solution,” and so forth, then collecting ethnographic data would most likely inform what to do once the problem has been identified.

Discussion

Concerning my draft research question, ethnographic fieldwork will be integral to my proposed project. The problem has been identified, and it manifests in ideas or truths of representation and misrepresentation. In order to claim that a museum exhibition misrepresents a community, I need to get feedback from that community. I cannot make claims that the overarching museum and art world misrepresents Rick Bartow, for example, by championing him as an individual Native American artist instead of as a representative of his tribal community, if I do not speak with Rick Bartow about the issue. The ethnographic process of interviewing key informants (I know that word is not *de rigueur*, but I must use it until I find a better one) is pivotal to my research question having any merit. And, in keeping with ethnographic ethics, I would need to respect the wishes of my informants and represent them properly in my research. It is important that I keep in mind the fact that I am not speaking for a community that would otherwise have no voice. Rather, I am proposing to develop a best practices guideline for institutions to use and consider as

regards exhibitions and museum programming that is focused on the representation of displaced and historically disenfranchised communities and community members.

Ethnographic fieldwork is qualitative and relies on the relationship between the ethnographer and the community/communities researched. Building these kinds of relationships takes time and trust. Ethnography is not always a successful process, and can be a hard fall when it fails as a research method. Limitations include access in the risk a researcher takes when they approach ethnography as relates to communities or community members. A museum is a public space, but the cultural communities that they represent are another matter entirely. If I were to focus on Native American cultural groups, I would have an outsider designation and need to gain trust with the community before requesting interviews. I would also maintain an ethical obligation in making sure I represented the communities I studied fairly and without betraying trust. Reciprocal ethnography would also be a concern, which means that I would need to focus on research that could benefit the communities I interviewed and studied. As an ethical ethnographer, I would have to make sure that I did not merely take information and then use it solely to benefit my own research interests.

Tools

Collecting data as an ethnographer is time-consuming but worthwhile. There is large collection of gadgets recommended for ethnographers in the field, including an audio recorder, video recorder, camera, etc. The equipment used all depends on what the outcome of the ethnographic project is. My research interests are not likely to require video footage, for example, but taped interviews with museum visitors and museum staff would be useful data to collect. Ideally, I could interview Deana Dartt about how she represents Native

American artists as the Native American Art curator at the Portland Art Museum, as well as Rick Bartow about the other side of representation as a Native artist. There are multiple interviewing strategies and techniques that I would follow to structure my interviews. I would pursue an informal interview style in order to share authority with my informants because trying to obtain information about cultural relativism in museum representation while maintaining a formal level of researcher control seems counterintuitive. While a semi-structured interview would be preferable, in order to direct the conversation to the topics I would need to discuss I might have to pursue a more structured interview. At this point, as well, I can primarily envision a one-to-one interview process, although creating a focus group from community members is a tempting avenue for ethnographic research.

Theoretical Analysis

Literature reviews are pivotal to this process. O’Leary defines literature reviews as “critical review[s] of a body of knowledge including findings and theoretical and methodological contributions” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 351). I chose to label this method as “theoretical analysis” because that is primarily how I will look at literature. Theoretical analysis is also necessary to back up my justification for research. I can say that cultural representation is problematic in museum exhibitions, but I need a foundation of theory to explain what the problem is, especially since it is counter to the dominant narrative of many museum exhibitions and constituencies.

Discussion

My selection of literature is based on finding sources that will inform my problem statement with theory and content. Literature research will also be instrumental in

describing and understanding context. Before I can relate theory to my problem statement and research topic, I need to create a bridge called “why does this matter?” Theory is a necessary backdrop for shaping what researchers wish to address, and why. This is where context is paramount. I cannot assume that everyone who reads my research will have the same informational context that I am entering the study with. I will need to set up which theoretical frameworks and constructs I am working with and why they contribute to my research question before I can delve into suggestions for best practices in anything. I could not make any statements at all, of course, if I did not have a theoretical foundation from which to build. The work of arts administrators, folklorists, anthropologists, museum professionals, and social thinkers before me is a crucial component to my potential research. I must know what was said and what was thought before I can contribute to it.

I am primarily interested in constructions of value, authenticity, authority, and cultural representation. Literature review data exists in secondary form, whether or not the source itself is primary. The data exists, I just need to access it and read it. This form of research is time-consuming as well, and as I greatly enjoy research I will have to hold back from burying myself in sources, not all of which will be useful for my question/topic.

Tools

Theory is part of a toolkit which helps the researcher understand and conceptually shape the world around them, in small doses or large ones. I can reach back and pluck out Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, for example, to help me analyze the construct of authority in museum stewardship. I can inspect John Falk’s far more recent work on museum visitor identity. Regina Bendix’s book *In Search of Authenticity* will provide a solid theoretical jumping off point for situating authenticity into the museum framework.

I know the concepts and theory that I wish to use to explore my topic, I merely need to gather it and show how it connects to my problem statement and the best practices guide that will emerge from this project. It is equally important that my literature reviews are flexible and able to change based on my case studies and ethnographic fieldwork.

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