Leah Bush

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Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies and Material Culture Reflection Essay

The Museum Studies Certificate Program introduced me to a wealth of perspectives on museological research and challenged me to think critically about the ethics of representation within cultural institutions and museum spaces. Obtaining a Master’s degree in American Studies is part of a career change, and the Certificate program gave me the opportunity to step out of my academic comfort zone and apply my research processes to understanding cultural performance as a mode of presentation. As I am not a material culturalist, archivist, anthropologist or archeologist, my approach to the Certificate was perhaps a bit different than my fellow graduate students. With Dr. Judith Freidenberg’s permission, I shaped my course of study around issues of research and performance instead of material culture or anthropological theory. When I enrolled in the program during my second semester, my mind was steeped in the topics of my Master’s thesis: subcultural theory and performances of middle aged identities in nightclub spaces, and cultural performance was not yet on my academic radar.

During the Introduction to Museum Studies seminar, my interest was piqued by issues of shared curatorial authority and representation, particularly during the readings on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where I was introduced to the problematic issues of representation embedded in “exhibiting” living cultures, as well as the idea that curation can hold the possibility to reimagine power relationships - at least to some extent - in settings that go beyond the traditional brick and mortar museum setting which enshrines objects. My general approach to research is formed by the congruence of ethnography, subcultural theory, and the study of everyday life, combined with the rejections of the essentialist trappings of my academic background in sociology, and as I began to learn more about how research can be performed in museum settings, I started to think about how approaches can intertwine.

My topic of interest became clearer when I came across Joni L. Jones’ principles of performance ethnography during my reading for the Museum Studies research seminar, which I paired readings from the upcoming volume *Curatorial Conversations*, written by curators at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which examine how curators at the Center distance themselves from the “exhibitionary complex” by embedding deep collaboration into the production of the Festival, and through the use of presenters on the Festival site. Ethnography has historically been a top-down enterprise undertaken by outsiders which replicates the colonial gaze, and more recent models, such as performance ethnography, are more attentive towards the ethics of representation, and work towards dismantling power structures through community collaboration. It seemed clear that placing performance ethnography in conversation with the Center’s “curatorial conversations” provides a lens for examining representation in the context of live performance, and I set out to learn more about the Festival’s approach to sharing curatorial authority firsthand during my practicum at the Center.

During the practicum, I worked under Dr. Olivia Cadaval and Dr. Sojin Kim as a research and curatorial intern for the upcoming *Sounds of California* program, part of a broader “Sounds of California” cultural initiative in partnership with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, Radio Bilingue, and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. *Sounds of California* brings together cultural producers, scholars, curators, and community organizers to explore how experiences of immigration are embedded and archived within social practice. *Sounds of California* also explores how music can work across borders to sustain and reshape traditions. At the Festival, the *Sounds of California* program will be presented through live music performances and workshops - a perfect practicum fit for a graduate student who is also a musician.

The practicum product, a draft of an internal introductory guide to the Festival written in accessible language which is suitable for adaptation for partners and artists, poses and answers questions about the Festival which have deeper implications for understanding the sharing of curatorial authority. As part of the guide, I also developed a typology of performances at the Festival which the Center can use as part of further evaluation of the Festival’s effectiveness in creating multidirectional communication. In creating the guide, I had to think about the role of curators and presenters as cultural intermediaries, which led me to further consider possibilities for sharing authority through embodiment and in performance spaces. Scholarship produced by curators is insistent that the role of the presenter/curator is to facilitate multidirectional communication between curators, participants, and visitors in way which allow for shared understanding, yet the Festival has also been critiqued for objectifying participants in a living diorama situation which strips participants of agency.

The Certificate program led me to consider methodological parallels and the application of interdisciplinary research techniques across fields, as I was simultaneously performing research for two very different projects during my final semester. I enjoy working independently, and at the Center, I differentiated the practicum from my internship duties by performing additional independent research for the guide using a wide array of the Center’s archival materials (video, audio recordings of interviews with artists, and Festival performances), internal production documents, personal observations on Festival curation processes through attendance and occasional participation at production meetings for *Sounds of California* and the upcoming online exhibit celebrating the Center’s 50th anniversary, and performed and transcribed ethnographic interviews with curators. I also formulated a list of interview questions for the Center’s future use when interviewing musical artists who have previously performed at the Festival.

While undertaking the practicum, I was also writing my Master’s thesis, “Alternative Imaginaries, Gothic Temporalities: An Ethnography of the Cultural Construction of Aging in the Goth Subculture,” which is the culmination of a two year project following the lives of middle aged Goths in Baltimore which examines how subcultural identities are expressed as part of lifespan projects. In these projects, I adapted similar methodological approaches based on the techniques that I learned in my Certificate methods course, “Ethnography and Performance,” with Dr. Laurie Frederik, who is also a member of my thesis committee. Ethnography is a collection of practices, not a single defined methodology, and rather than asking the “big,” obvious questions, I learned to shape my interview topics around the “little questions” which attempt to understand the larger curatorial issues at stake. One of my greatest challenges as an ethnographer is to let the informants tell the story rather than inserting my own preconceptions of the research topic, and the practicum underscored the importance of flexibility within one’s project. I constantly revised my interview questions in both projects - as well as some of my research questions! - in order to make the most of the richness of the material and the curators’ expertise.

The practicum also raised my awareness of relationships between theory and praxis within museum scholarship in two ways. First, I understood that the relationship must be renegotiated to determine what is appropriate for the site of study. It is far simpler for one to be critical of a cultural institution’s approach to the exhibition of cultures when one is on the outside looking in than when one is steeped in the logistics of staging a Festival or designing an exhibit. Although some separation is necessary for the sake of scholarly objectivity, too much separation between theory and praxis can lead to critiques which are somewhat unfounded or come across as pre-fabricated.[[1]](#footnote-1) I walked into the Center as a Festival novice, theory-filled practicum proposal in hand, with a bit of trepidation (as I was out of my subject area of expertise) and some rather lengthy and in-depth research questions. After reviewing archival material and existing Smithsonian guides for contract field researchers and Festival presenters, I realized that my questions about identity negotiation within the cultures of everyday life were too large and abstract for my timeframe. I needed to reconsider the critical questions I was asking in order to get at the larger issues surrounding ethnography and performance. Instead of asking detailed research questions about everyday life, I took a mental step back and started by asking *What happens at the Festival? How does it happen, and why does it matter?* Through beginning with these more basic questions, I could begin to examine deeper issues of representation.

I realized very quickly that Folklife Festival scholarship is filtered through multiple individual curatorial lenses. Part of the Center’s philosophy is to “let the theory be shaped from praxis,”[[2]](#footnote-2) and each curator brings their own viewpoint to each Festival programs. There is no definitive history of the Festival or guide to the Center’s research processes; scholarship produced by curators is a largely celebratory collection of varied stories and histories based on individual experiences at each Festival. One of my practicum objectives was to piece together a general overview of the Center’s research processes and a typology of performances. With this information in hand, I could shape theoretical questions and critiques more appropriate to the scale of this project as well as questions for further study. In this sense, my trepidation was unfounded and my unfamiliarity with the Festival’s praxis became an asset, as I could gather information for the Center to provide to outside parties in an accessible manner.

The relationship between theory and praxis in museum scholarship seemed to be more of a divide when I was a panelist at the Small Museum Association Conference in Ocean City, Maryland with fellow Certificate students Kevin Kim and Nadine Dangerfield in February 2016.[[3]](#footnote-3) During the panel, we posed for discussion what was to us, a simple and straightforward question based on the scholarship in our coursework: *How do museums create ideas?* The attendees were befuddled, commenting both during the session and on comment cards that our discussion was far too abstract and confusing. But unless we are looking backwards to the exhibitionary complex, or Janet Marstine’s paradigm of “museum as shrine,” ideas are at the heart of museums. The question at that point is reversed from my experience at the Smithsonian (where many curators are well versed in the principles of new museology), and becomes *how can critical museological theories become incorporated into smaller museums?* - a question examined throughout our museum studies seminars. I received the Prince George’s County Consortium Fellowship to attend the entire conference, and from the sessions I attended as well as Certificate coursework visits to small museums, it is apparent that museums of all sizes are already engaging with these topics when creating exhibits, so the conference raised the questions: *What makes these questions difficult to understand for small museum professionals? Is our scholarly language too inaccessible? What are the missing links, and how can we explain these ideas to other museum professionals?*

In summary, the Certificate program has introduced me to scholarly issues that I cannot leave behind. After undertaking the Certificate program, I decided to pursue a career path in the museum field, and intend to complete my studies at the doctoral level focusing on cultural performance research methodologies. The practicum also raised issues for future research. As so often happens, attempting to answer research questions leads more to new questions than definitive answers. A large amount of the ethnographic material I collected wound up being unused in this practicum, and as I drafted the accompanying research paper, I became more interested in the questions I was not able to answer in this project: *What is the after-life of a festival? What cultural tensions arise in the wake of a Festival? Was the Festival transformative for the participants, and how did they view the curators’ efforts at sharing curatorial authority?* The conclusion of my practicum product begins to pose these questions, and I am extending my internship with the Center further into the summer while continuing to work on *Sounds of California*to examine these issues firsthand.

1. An example is Richard Price and Sally Price’s book *On the Mall: Presenting Maroon Tradition-Bearers at the 1992 FAF*, who presented specifically to create critical literature on the Festival, and essentially savaged the Festival for creating a “living zoo” by emphasizing the minutiae of logistical disorganization and disgruntled participants over minor matters while ignoring the logistical difficulties of producing an event on such a massive scale. Although *On the Mall* contains some valid and realistic critiques, the overall impression and tone of the book is that the authors created their main argument before they presented at the Festival. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Olivia Cadaval, discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Other graduate students participated by conference call because of an unexpected Valentine’s Day snowstorm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)