

Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments

Amy Lonetree

I have spent the last twenty-plus years and counting researching and writing on Indigenous public history projects, most notably on the changing relationship between Indigenous people and museums. This research is featured in my book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, which focuses on the representation of Native Americans in museum exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and two Anishinabe tribal museums (the Mille Lacs Indian Museum in Minnesota and the Ziiibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways in Michigan).¹ Through an analysis of exhibition texts and images, archival records related to exhibition development, and interviews with key staff members, I explore the changing representations of Indigenous history and memory in a diverse group of museums that hold significant Native American cultural resources.

In my scholarship, I give considerable attention to the relatively recent museological shift from curator-controlled presentations of the Native American past to a more inclusive or collaborative process with Indigenous people actively involved in determining exhibition content. My work critically examines the complexities of this relationship—both the positive outcomes as well as the challenges that remain. Central to my analysis is exploring how museums can serve as sites of decolonization through honoring Indigenous knowledge and worldview, and by discussing the hard truths of colonization in exhibitions in an effort to move toward healing and understanding.² This process of examining the hard truths also needs to include critical self-examination on the part of colonial institutions regarding their relationship with Indigenous tribal nations and communities in the past and present.³

¹ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

² Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*.

³ The University of Minnesota is currently preparing a historical report of their relationship with Indigenous nations to fully understand what has happened throughout the institution's history in their dealings with Native American communities and nations. I believe it is important for

Over the last nine years since the publication of *Decolonizing Museums*, I have had the privilege of addressing diverse audiences including students, scholars, museum professionals, and public historians who are seeking to develop new interpretative programs and exhibitions related to Indigenous history that challenge stereotypical representations produced in the past, share authority, and recognize our history in all its complexity. It seems as though these conversations addressing colonialism and its ongoing effects both within and outside of museums are even more urgent now. During this time of significant historical and cultural reckoning in the United States and beyond, we have all witnessed powerful acts of protest as settler colonial interpretations and stereotypical representations of the past are challenged and statues to colonizers removed. In California where I currently reside, Indigenous people are challenging the mythology surrounding the history of the California Mission System including the memorials and monuments that featured a very one-sided representation of this history.⁴ This activism included the removal of statues celebrating the colonizers including those of Junipero Serra, the architect of the California Mission System.

I have followed these developments closely and participated in several events including a July 2020 conference organized by the Critical Mission Studies Research Project, “Toppling Mission Monuments and Mythology,” that addressed the importance of this moment of colonial reckoning. Bearing witness to these powerful events has left me with several questions that can serve to help decolonize public history more broadly that begin with identifying whose narratives we privilege in interpretative spaces and why. Whose histories are celebrated at the time of

universities and other institutions including museums and historic sites to do the same. Ryan Faircloth, “University of Minnesota Initiative to Examine School’s History with Tribes, Teach Residents About Racial Justice,” *Star Tribune*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-initiative-to-examine-school-s-history-with-tribes-teach-residents-about-rac/600010235/>; Ryan Faircloth, “Land Seizures, ‘Unethical’ Research: University of Minnesota Confronts Troubled History with Tribal Nations,” *Star Tribune*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.startribune.com/land-seizures-unethical-research-university-of-minnesota-confronts-troubled-history-with-tribal-nati/600041972/?refresh=true>.

4 For a history of the California Mission system, see Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Lisbeth Haas, *Pablo Tac, Indigenous Scholar: Writing on Luiseño Language and Colonial History, c. 1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Lisbeth Haas, *Saints and Citizens: Indigenous Histories of Colonial Missions and Mexican California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Steven W. Hackel, ed., *Alta California: Peoples in Motion, Identities in Formation, 1769–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Robert H. Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2013); Lee M. Panich, “After Saint Serra: Unearthing Indigenous Histories at the California Missions,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (2016): 238–58; Lee Panich and Tsim Schneider, eds., *Indigenous Landscapes and Spanish Missions: New Perspectives from Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014); and James A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

a memorial or monuments' creation and which narratives of historical events and historical actors are they seeking to promote? What are the legacies of these representations in the present? Historian Christine DeLucia in her scholarship on "memoryscapes" in the Northeast argues that what makes monuments and historic places important "is the web of relationships that surround them: the historical negotiations and disagreements that give rise to them, the acts of collective memorialization that take place at their installation, the perpetually unfinished aftermath that keeps their material forms and meanings in flux."⁵ In her book, *Memory Lands: King Phillip's War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast*, DeLucia defines memoryscapes as "constellations of spots on the land that have accrued stories over time, transforming them from seemingly blank or neutral spaces into emotionally infused, politically potent places."⁶ The memorials and monuments on the California landscape are significant memoryscapes as well, and Indigenous communities and scholars have called for a more rigorous interpretation of California Mission history that more accurately reflects the Indigenous experience in the missions that centers their stories and honors their survival.

What does it mean then for Indigenous people to reassert their presence and celebrate their survivance in these memoryscapes that have previously celebrated a very one-sided version of history? Seeing these monuments and statues to the colonizers throughout our lifetime is an assault to our humanity, as Dakota scholar Waziyatawin has argued, and it is a powerful act of reclamation to assert our presence and resilience in the aftermath of their removal.⁷

Throughout the summer of 2020, we watched statues of Junipero Serra topple, including one that once stood in downtown Los Angeles. Seeing Indigenous community members standing together, smudging, praying, crying, and cheering as they watched the statue fall was an important moment to bear witness to Indigenous Californians celebrating their survival, histories, counter narratives, and resilience against all odds in the face of settler colonial genocide.⁸

This leads me to another question: What should happen in the unfinished aftermath of these removals? While it is exciting to see these statues and memorials toppled, the logical question is what comes next both in the long and short term. In regard to the short term, I want to briefly comment on an experience that I had the privilege of participating in that informs my thinking on the significance of Indigenous commemorative acts in the wake of removal. In April 2019, I joined with other Indigenous people in San Francisco to have our portraits taken where the

5 Christine M. DeLucia, *Memory Lands: King Philip's War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 326.

6 DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 3.

7 Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "Decolonizing the 1862 Death Marches," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, nos. 1&2 (2004): 199.

8 "Los Angeles Protesters Take Down Father Junipero Serra Statue," CBS Los Angeles, June 21, 2020, <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2020/06/21/father-junipero-serra-statue-downtown-la/>; and Carolina A. Miranda, "At Los Angeles Toppling of Junipero Serra Statue, Activists Want Full History Told," *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2020.



The toppling of the Junipero Serra statue by Indigenous activists in downtown Los Angeles on June 20, 2020. Carolina A. Miranda, “At Los Angeles Toppling of Junipero Serra Statue, Activists Want Full History Told,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2020. (Photo by Gary Coronado, courtesy of the Los Angeles Times)

statue “Early Days” once stood, a monument near the city’s Civic Center that celebrated Indigenous genocide and settler colonialism. “Early Days” was a deeply offensive statue of a vaquero and a missionary standing above a Native person laying at their feet and looking up at the colonizers. Thanks to the activism of many in the Bay Area Indigenous community, the statue was finally removed in September 2018.⁹ I did not have an opportunity to witness that event but I did participate in an extraordinary moment of reclamation and celebration in April 2019 organized by the San Francisco Arts Commission led by Barbara Mumby Huerta and others, who came up with the brilliant idea to invite Native people in curated groups to stand together on the statue and reclaim this space. I cannot even begin to describe how empowering it was to stand on top of that empty plinth with my fellow Indigenous professors Beth Piatote, Elizabeth “Betty” Parent, and Andrew Jolivette. The gifted Seminole/Muscogee/Diné photographer Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie was there to take everyone’s photograph and we all stood proudly on top that empty platform where

⁹ Camila Domonoske, “San Francisco Removes Statue of Native Man at Feet of Colonizers,” *NPR*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/14/647904005/san-francisco-removes-statue-of-native-man-at-feet-of-colonizers> and Dominic Fracassa, “SF’s Controversial ‘Early Days’ Statue Taken Down Before Sunrise,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14, 2018.



Two children posing for photographs on top of the defaced statue of Junipero Serra in Los Angeles. Carolina A. Miranda, “At Los Angeles Toppling of Junipero Serra Statue, Activists Want Full History Told,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2020. (Photo by Gary Coronado, courtesy of the Los Angeles Times)

a monument celebrating the genocide of Indigenous people had stood for over one-hundred years. There is something powerful about reclaiming these memorial spaces, standing tall and proud with my fellow Native American community members, and watching others I love and respect do the same. It was a gift to be part of this event reminding the world that we are resilient, strong, courageous, and proud. Most significantly, I now have embodied knowledge of how truly empowering it can be to stand on an empty plinth in a collective moment of victory, to assert our versions of the past, and celebrate the survivance of Indigenous people against all odds. This is just one commemorative option in the aftermath of removal.

In terms of the long-term future of these sites, conversations, led by California Indigenous people, need to continue. In a recently published article, April McGill offers her views on the way forward and how we support Indigenous communities. She stated, “give them a space. Give them a park. Create a dance arena. Give them back their shellmounds . . . a place to continue to hold their ceremonies, and grow their indigenous food.” Giving Indigenous Californians their land back is “how you honor them—not via a statue.”¹⁰ I could not agree more; one of the next important

¹⁰ Carly Severn, “How Do We Heal? Toppling the Myth of Junipero Serra” *KQED*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11826151/how-do-we-heal-toppling-the-myth-of-junipero-serra>.



Indigenous professors posing where the “Early Days” statue commemorating settler colonial genocide once stood. Sitting: Andrew Jolivet and Elizabeth Parent. Standing left to right: Amy Lonetree and Beth Piatote. (Photo taken by and courtesy of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie)

steps should center the return of lands tied to missions that rightfully belong to the Indigenous Nations of California. Further, Indigenous Californians should have primacy in determining the memorials and educational programs that are developed at these sites as it is critical to change the narrative at the twenty-one mission sites as well as to remove the statues. It is also important to preserve and steward the archives at the missions, and make this information available to descendant communities. Archives have the power to assist with contemporary cultural reclamation efforts and to be mobilized to support Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty. Additionally, the historical and family records that are stored in the

archives are irreplaceable records of Indigenous family histories and their complex connections to the missions. The fire at the San Gabriel Mission in July 2020 reminds us of the urgency of this work—and state resources need to be devoted to protecting these collections, as they are powerful sources of knowledge production and cultural reclamation for Indigenous Californians.¹¹

Scholar James Young reminds us that, “without having acted on memory we allow memory to be incomplete.”¹² Through the act of removing these colonial statues and reasserting their own presence, including by literally standing on top of empty plinths where these monuments once stood, Native Californians are acting on memory and by so doing, are not allowing memory of this history of the mission system to remain unchallenged and incomplete. They are asserting their presence and a renewed commitment to challenging the colonial narratives of mission history for current and future generations. This is an act of decolonization, survivance, reclamation, and profound love for the people—past, present, and emerging.

As public historians, we need to keep these moments of Indigenous heritage reclamation in mind as we think critically about what it means to decolonize interpretation, museums, and monuments in the twenty-first century.

• • • • •

Amy Lonetree is an enrolled citizen of the Ho-Chunk Nation and an Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her scholarly research focuses on Native American history, public history, visual culture studies, and museum studies. Her publications include *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012); a co-edited book with Amanda J. Cobb, *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008); and a co-authored volume, *People of the Big Voice: Photographs of Ho-Chunk Families by Charles Van Schaick, 1879–1942* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011).

¹¹ Andrew J. Campa, Alex Wigglesworth, and Sonali Kohli, “San Gabriel Mission, a Symbol of Faith, History, and Oppression, is Badly Damaged by Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2020.

¹² As quoted in, *Public Memory: A Film About American Memorials*, prod. and dir. Amy Gerber, 68 min., FlatCoat Films, 2003, videocassette.