theories and methodologies

Museums behind the Gallery Doors

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I AM OFTEN ASKED HOW A VICTORIANIST CAME TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS AND THE BRITISH QUEST FOR AND TRAFfic in pre-Columbian antiquities. When I began, I had no formal training in these subjects and thus little that would count as a theory or method. Of course, as my interest grew I read as much of the scholarly literature as I could: critical studies of important collectors; analyses of exhibitionary practice and museum administration; the history of the museum from cabinets of curiosity to the virtual collections of the present. Yet much of what I learned in writing my own book, *Informal Empire*, was pieced together, often haltingly, one fragment at a time through a deep immersion in a rich archive. Sensing I was on new ground, I rejected any overarching schema, adhering to the perhaps counterintuitive notion that the best way to make the archive speak was to resist imposing a theory on it and instead to allow the shape of the materials themselves to suggest ways of proceeding. To illustrate both the advantages and the liabilities of this method, which I employed while working on nineteenth-century ethnography collections, I have chosen here to reconstruct the key steps of the scholarly journey that took me from the library to the world of museums and archives. I offer this reflection on critical practice first as an exercise in demystification and second as an encouragement to anyone, but especially students, who might wish to travel similar paths.

In the mid-1990s I chanced upon Gordon Chaplin's *Fever Coast Log* in the travel section of my local bookstore. An account of the author's sailing voyage in the 1980s along the Atlantic coast of Central America, Chaplin's narrative makes for light reading, but it contains an interesting scholarly nugget, a reference to his ancestor Frederick Catherwood, an English illustrator who accompanied the American John Lloyd Stephens in the late 1830s on an expedition to explore and describe the ruined cities of Central America. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* became one of the most popular nineteenth-century works of travel, finding an appreciative audience on both sides of the Atlantic. Curious, I searched

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the scholarly literature for critical accounts of Stephens and the larger oeuvre of nineteenth-century travel writing about Latin America. I was familiar with postcolonial work that examined travel literature's role in the project of European imperialism, but aside from Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* and some shorter pieces on individual texts, I found little that dealt explicitly and comprehensively with Latin America, a region thrust into prominence first by Alexander von Humboldt's epic journeys and second by the independence movements of the 1820s.[1] Scholarly attention centered on accounts of travel to Asia, Africa, and North America and of the grand tour. Pratt's book, though valuable, dwells principally on South America, providing only a brief account of nineteenth-century travelers' fascination with pre-Columbian antiquities, a topic that had piqued my interest. A quick search of the Library of Congress under the subject headings "description" and "travel," limited to Mexico and Central America, revealed an extensive literature that was ripe for study. I made plans to spend several weeks of my summer at the British Library, reading as many of those texts as I could.

At the time, the library was housed in the British Museum in Bloomsbury, so I could leave my desk and wander through the galleries just beyond the library doors. There, along with throngs of tourists, I took in the glories of the museum: the Parthenon marbles, the Assyrian winged bulls, the Rosetta stone. One afternoon, in a back corner of the museum, I stumbled across something rather different, the Mexican Gallery, which had opened in 1994, just two years before my visit. Prompted more by general curiosity than a specific scholarly quest, I entered the room to discover a clean, well-lighted place filled with remarkable artifacts from ancient Mexico. The proverbial light went on, and in the remaining days of my visit I returned frequently to the gallery, forming questions raised by the objects I saw there. Who had collected them and why? When did they enter the museum, and within what cultural frame were they initially understood to belong? How had their meaning shifted over the decades since their acquisition? And what was the relation between these objects and the narratives that described the larger British interest in Latin America, narratives I had been reading in the library, that other branch of the museum?

I had no interest in merely producing a "reading" of the gallery but wanted to understand the historical processes that led to the transatlantic journey of the artifacts it contained. I looked in vain for this information. Like the official guidebook to the collection (McEwan), the gallery labels and explanatory texts focused principally on the cultures that had made the artifacts, not the motivations and means of the individuals and institutions that collected them. Indeed, the gallery's glossy perfection seemed designed to repel any investigation into the messy details of acquisition or, possibly, plunder. My first inquiries at the Department of Ethnography, which oversees the collection, went nowhere.[2] Staffers were preoccupied with moving the collections and archives from the Museum of Mankind, where they had been stored since the 1970s, back to the main museum site in Bloomsbury and thus had little time for responding to on-site inquiries about the gallery. I was told to submit a formal proposal and return the following summer. When at last I gained entry to the students' room, I found an archive stunning both for its disarray and for its institutional closure. Relevant records were scattered across the museum, some on an ancient computer database, some in typed paper registers, and others on handwritten accession slips. I could find no comprehensive searching aids, bibliographies, or synopses. Crucial documents had gone missing, and others could not be produced because no one had keys to the locked cabinets where they were stored. At the main site in Bloomsbury, cramped conditions and scant resources bogged down research:

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the central archives, which contained the all-important trustees' minutes, opened its doors to researchers only two days a week, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., with a one-hour closure for lunch. It had chairs for just two readers.[3]

I was tempted to retreat to the familiar confines of the round reading room, with its pleasing rationality and plentiful seating. I had found ample material to support an original book about British travelers to Latin America, and I feared a fruitless errand into a possibly unknowable museum archive. The literary texts I was reading, however, pointed emphatically to the significance of museums in the larger enterprise of Latin American travel. William Bullock—whom I first learned about from Richard Altick's *The Shows of London*, a book that profoundly shaped my research methodology—not only described Aztec artifacts but brought them to London to be displayed in a special exhibition crafted to represent newly independent Mexico as a promising field for British capital investment (Aguirre 1–26). Twenty years later, Stephens fashioned a similar scheme for Mayan artifacts. On seeing the ruined Mayan city of Copan, in present-day Honduras, he immediately announced his intention to "remove the monuments of a by-gone people . . . and found an institution to be the nucleus of a great national museum of American antiquities" in New York, one that would rival the British Museum and its "precious memorials" (1: 115). In this literature, it was not enough simply to describe or even illustrate objects of antiquity; they must also be carried away and exhibited, pressed into service for projects of national identity.

To grasp how narration was entwined with appropriation, I needed to reach beyond the exhibitionary surfaces of the museum, beyond the objects themselves, to the motors that drove the acquisition of individual pieces and of collections. Narrative histories of the museum offered overviews but, like the museum itself, privileged the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian collections to the detriment of ethnography;[4] broad surveys also did not lay bare the network of relations among travelers and institutions that facilitated the identification, removal, and display of valued objects. For this microhistory, the best sources were the biweekly trustees' minutes and the original correspondence stored in the museum's central archives. These documents capture the dynamic of traveler's entreaty and museum's response by which the collections grew. They show what was valued, how much the trustees were willing to pay, and the pressures exerted on the British Museum by a ruthlessly competitive antiquities market. The minutes and correspondence also bear out Thomas Richards's idea that in the nineteenth-century "imperial archive" objects and information flowed in at a much faster rate than they could be processed—accelerated, it seemed to me, by the frequent publication of travelers' narratives and their heroic accounts of archeological discovery. Thus, the slovenly and disorganized archive that greeted me might be understood as the inevitable consequence of decades of appetitive excess, at once Borgesian garden of forking paths and Dickensian nightmare of half-finished inventories, clutching fingers, and cobwebbed treasures. No amount of record keeping could match the pace of acquisition detailed in the archives. As to the artifacts themselves, most were put away in storage, where they have remained, the casualty of a collecting logic that prized accumulation over display and study. Their stories remain untold.

A project that had begun in the library with questions about a literary genre and then veered into the museum with questions about objects had now turned to the archive and questions about the system of paper that composed it. My literary training had emphasized not only that literary works spring from specific historical conditions but also that history itself is mediated through texts. Certainly, the trustees' minutes and original correspondence

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constituted an unusual corpus for a scholar of literature, but the more I studied them, the more they seemed as significant as the travel narratives with which I had begun. And although I had taken up many historical questions, my approach was still predominantly literary, which meant considering the archival papers not merely as transparent vessels of useful information but as texts in their own right, with discernable forms, tropes, vectors of desire, gaps, and omissions.

The paper archive, like other rich literary texts, was also remarkably intertextual and allusive. During one of my Tuesday and Thursday visits to the central archives in Bloomsbury, I once again stumbled across something that profoundly shaped my research. Reading the original correspondence to track the acquisition of collections during the 1840s, I noticed that some papers had been annotated in the margin with the letters FO and CO. After a moment of puzzling, I realized these signs must refer to the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office. The next day I made the first of many visits to the Public Records Office (now the National Archives) in Kew, where I discovered several dozen related documents that disclosed an audacious plot to make off with some of the most prized antiquities in all of Central America, the sculptured remains of Copan and of Quirigua, another Mayan city, in present-day Guatemala (Aguirre 61–102). Composed not only by museum officials but by secretaries of state for the foreign and colonial offices and by their agents abroad, the documents revealed that these officials first learned of the antiquities in question by reading the travel narratives of Stephens and Catherwood. The letters and dispatches, many quite lengthy and impassioned, constitute a multiauthor epistolary corpus written over fourteen years, by correspondents in London and the distant jungles of Central America. I felt on familiar ground, having before me a set of letters similar in many respects to those found in the epistolary novels of the 1740s, though different enough to open up interesting questions about cultures of manuscript circulation, all-male scribal communities, the deployment of an imperial style, and ultimately the efficacy of dispatches in solving the imperial problem par excellence—how to act at a distance, a formulation brilliantly elaborated in the writings of Bruno Latour (e.g., "Drawing"). Here library, museum, and archive had come together beautifully, but only because I had made the methodological decision to think through the museum from within, inhabiting its nerve center—the primary documents of the trustees' minutes and correspondence—and patiently tracking each impulse and brain wave. Had I restricted myself to the gallery or even the published accounts of the museum's history, these connections would have eluded me.

Working in the well-kept files of the Public Records Office formed a pleasing contrast to the situation at the museum. Like the modern university library, the office featured a state-of-the-art computer database and a variety of printed guides, finding lists, and detailed indexes. A staff of knowledgeable and friendly archivists stood ready to help. With the swipe of a card, readers summoned the required documents, which a system of moving belts conveyed from an underground shelving area to the reading rooms above. The place hummed like a well-oiled machine. Yet doubts crept in, again suggested by the materials I had come to the archive to examine. The plot to remove the ruins had behind it the combined force of the British Museum and the highest levels of government. Vast material and economic resources lay to hand, but the desired objects were never carried off, their theft thwarted by intractable conditions on the ground, not least of which was the resistance of local people, Creole elites and the indigenous alike, to the loss of their valued monuments. The meticulously arranged documents, however, shunted Central Americans to the margins, laying blame for the failure

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on a mixture of bad luck, poor weather, and bureaucratic red tape. Here the imperial archive's chief trait was not excess but parsimony—a condition I would later understand through Ann Laura Stoler's claim that an archive is a metaphor for "any corpus of selective forgettings" (94).

Museums, likewise, are characterized by this selective forgetting—destroying and erasing even as they preserve the material remains of history. My heart leaped when I first saw the incomparably beautiful Yaxchilan lintels arrayed in the Mexican Gallery. It ached when I later learned how they had been brought there, removed from a ruined Mayan city by a celebrated nineteenth-century British archaeologist, who facilitated the task by sawing them into portable slabs, the same technique employed by looters today. These actions produced two results: in one place, a priceless collection protected in a climate-controlled environment, bathed by soft lighting and guarded by a fiber-optic alarm; in the other, blank spaces signifying a stolen past. These irresolvable paradoxes seemed to me to mirror in some strange way my own research method, one in which new "discoveries" were matched at every turn by the inevitable silences and gaps of the archival record.

Notes

1. The key works devoted to travel literature about Latin America are Ortega y Medina; Gunn; Cicerchia; and Jones. After I was well along, Harvey and Evans each published important readings of Stephens and Catherwood.

2. In 1997 the Department of Ethnography was renamed the Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

3. Research conditions at the British Museum have improved dramatically since the opening of the Great Court and the return of the ethnography department to Bloomsbury. The museum's Web site has grown to become a valuable research tool (www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights.aspx). Nevertheless, scholars used to the luxurious research facilities now afforded by many university libraries may need to adjust their expectations downward when working in museum archives, especially those with limited funds.

4. Annie E. Coombes's book on the plunder of African antiquities is a notable exception.

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