The Dialectic of Discernment: An Essay on Methods of Contradiction in Three Modern Revisionist Histories

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Discussing and judging meta-historical narratives is ultimately an act of confronting and revealing structures of power. This requires a pragmatic and methodical approach that displays the conceptual "angle" an author presents as an *expository*, and then realizes it throughout the *narrative structure* of the work. In this article, I will examine examples of this rhetorical style in three works which challenge power structures by revising the meta-narratives around race, ethnicity, historical memory, and positionality. We examine these works and scholars because they "practice what they preach." In so doing, I contend that these three texts participate in a dialectical process of meta-historical discernment as representative textual additions to their respective epistemes.[1] The primary focus of this article will be to explore what methodologically binds these revisionist works into the contemporary US historiography about race, identity, and positionality. That is, this is an attempt to look for commonalities in works of historical discernment so-to reveal how each of these works refocus metanarratives to reveal historical silences.[2] As we will discover, regardless of the topic or structure of the respective narrative, certain philosophies are central to each author's historiographic method: (1) self-analysis on behalf of the author(s), (2) the examination of competing narratives and perspectives at *multiple* levels of the historical knowledge production process, and (3) a dedication to uncovering silenced voices and alternate perspectives. It is important to mention here that each of the scholars discussed were chosen for this study because they do not statutorily impugn their positions and arguments upon the reader, but rather, they problematize certain meta-historical narratives; analyzing structures of power, revealing silenced voices, interjecting contradictory narratives, and imagining new perspectives that can be feasibly worked into the historical dialectic.

In *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, Edward Blum and Paul Harvey problematize myths about race and religion in US society, focusing on the iconography of Jesus Christ from the seventeenth century to the present-day. They argue that images of Christ are intrinsically connected to constructions of Jesus in society; how over four-hundred years, these constructions often fomented into traditions which perpetuate racialized hierarchies that informed social notions of religious bodies. [3] In exposition, Blum and Harvey give eloquent refutation for many myths of race and religion constructed at various levels of the historical knowledge production process in academia. They are equally, if not more interested,

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[1] A by-product of this historical methodology of contradiction is the revelation of persistent "silences," which are untended by previous historical treatments. For a pertinent argument concerning the inherency of historical "silences" see Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 49.

[2] Here, the phrase dialectic of discernment need be clarified: it describes a specific methodology which combines the use of exposition and narrative in such a way as to contradict (and thus alter) meta-historical structures. "Discernment" here should not be confused with its secondary definition, "faith in the absence of reason."

[3] Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 13. Harvey and Blum accomplish this by examining what they call "the creation and exercise of racial and religious power through images of Jesus and how that power is experienced by everyday people."

in social constructions of Christ iconography found in pop-culture. Some points of focus in their narrative are: a rejection of the Publius Lentulus Letter as a fraudulent document and why this is disseminated into Christ images in society, an expository refutation of the notion that constructed interpretations of Christ (which they posit are superficially-bound to the color of one's skin), and finally, the assertion that images of Jesus are "repeatedly created, tested, and transformed" throughout society.[4] This final notion, Blum and Harvey examine at various points in time and space in U.S. history.[5]

Blum and Harvey's revision refutes notions of racial superiority not through a polemical criticism, but rather by *disconnecting* racially charged constructions of the Christ figure from societal constructions of religious bodies. [6] As they surmise, by linking Christ to whiteness, various groups helped affirm the notion of hierarchy and racial superiority which became entrenched in nineteenth-century racial theories.[7] What's more, while their dialectic discerning theological thought and racialized constructions in U.S. history is clearly accepted as an academic text, the work was intended for a broader audience concerned with future constructions of religious bodies in popular culture. In addition, Blum and Harvey's examination of social constructions of Christ iconography in the United States was written with a North-American parlance, so while it has this stylistic quality, it remains no doubt well-steeped in historical praxis and theory.[8] Indeed, Blum and Harvey do attach an United States cultural archetypes to events represented in their treatment of twentieth-century race and religion through use of various references to popular icons in the U.S. such as Dan Brown, Mel Gibson, *In Living Color,* and the *Chappelle Show*, etc.. That said, I think their intent is to position themselves in a familiar and contemporary North American space to connect with readers, and as we will discuss, this is a very different positionality than Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts. [9]

In sum, Blum and Harvey's work brings attention to the complex history of twentieth-century social issues surrounding race and religion in the U.S. using various pop-culture, academic, and publicly derived sources to make their case. Their efforts also reveal a level of self-analysis and perhaps white guilt about their positions as scholars who arguably struggle to relate to broader and more diverse audiences outside of academia.[10] This work does the difficult job of problematizing deep-seated trends in U.S. meta-historical narratives by discerning social-

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[4] Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ,* 7.
[5] Ibid., 13, 20, 21, 7.
[6] Ibid., 13.
[7] Ibid., 15.
[8] Albeit, Blum and Harvey's exposition on Civil-War-through-Civil-Rights-era theological thought and practice strikes an academic tone well-founded in literary evidence see Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997) for corroboration. See chapter 9 and the epilogue in *The Color of Christ* (2012) for an arguably less formal use of vernacular and source material thus stressing the author's need to connect to a non-academic audience. This is expressed through a cacophony of U.S. pop-culture references used throughout the work but also by the relationship Blum and Harvey develop with the reader through their parlance of candor that celebrates what Trouillot (1995) calls "the ceremonial of love." See *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), xviii.
[9]This is also made exceedingly clear through their use of various forms of visual iconography common in U.S. Christian dogma and pop-culture. See, *The Color of Christ*, (2012: 13, 260, 267-73).
[10] Importantly, Blum and Harvey make no attempt to position themselves outside the auspices of the academic institution despite the use of such varied source material from multiple spheres of knowledge production occurring inside *and* outside of the academy.

and-academic constructions of race and religion, *and,* by scrutinizing images of Christ in various parts of society. It is reasonable to surmise for their efforts that Blum and Harvey confront the religious power structure to ensure these socio-religious constructions are replaced with nuanced representations of bodies more representative of the culturally diverse society they posit exists in the US. The alternative, for Blum and Harvey, is the dubious perpetuation of an unacceptable visual politics: images of Christ which leave notions of racial inferiority unchecked to vindicate antiquated racist hierarchies in religious institutions and society. [11]

Like Blum and Harvey's refutation of racially-motivated social-constructions of religious bodies, late Haitian anthropologist M.R. Trouillot also refutes historical representations of the Haitian revolution through an expositional counter narrative entitled *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.[12] While Blum and Harvey examine constructions of religious "bodies" at various strata of society and academia, Trouillot's work is distinguished by an examination of the power structure affecting the historical knowledge production process. If Blum and Harvey's work is interested in the social constructions of Christ iconography in the U.S., then Trouillot's looks more closely at the structure of power which affects the historical guild (as he dubs it) in the same space. For Trouillot, going so far as to say the historical knowledge production process of the guild, "reflects the social and political divisions of American society." [13]

In his exposition-driven narrative, Trouillot's first historiographical contribution is a persuasive argument for a methodical structural analysis of negative-space extant in the historical record of an event at the archive-level, the narrative-level, and at the level of the chronicler who records an event.[14] This negative-space; the silence in the past, is described by Trouillot as a dialectic of mentions and silences in an historical archive.[15]

In the second part of his historiographical contribution, Trouillot argues the West struggled to reconcile with the notion of Haitian Independence (1804) especially in the context of a booming eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Atlantic slave-based economy. What is more, he posits the colonial inclination to ignore the Haitian Revolution has perpetuated historical silence in modern historiography. This will-to-ignore the progress of the Haitian people, he argues, formed from ideologies of racial hierarchy which solidified in the early seventeenth-century, but emerged far earlier.[16] Ultimately, Trouillot posits the West struggled

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[11] Blum and Harvey are clear in their introduction that race is an artificial construction that has an enormous amount of power as a societal construction and as a thematic element which runs through the metahistorical narrative of race and religion in the U.S..

[12] In similarity to Blum and Harvey (2012) Trouillot's work is not polemical, but instead driven by several narratives which are familiar to Western audiences. These include expository narratives of The Alamo, and The U.S. Civil War, which focus on the persistent silenced voices that are overshadowed by meta-historical narratives on these topics. Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 1-4, 14-22, 40-41.

[13] Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past*, 21.

[14] Ibid., 95-99.

[15] This is a structural examination of an archive. Ibid., 53.

[16] As Trouillot argues, not only did racism emerge much earlier than the eighteenth century, local rhetoric created during and after the Haitian revolution proves inhabitants of that island espoused notions of Afrocentrism a century before its incarnation in the United States and Europe. Also, Trouillot's argument falls more in-line with a counter narrative here as he argues racial theories emerged mid-15th-century in Spain whilst Blum and Harvey argue this occurred in the mid-seventeenth-century, the latter being chronologically in agreement with the meta narrative.

with notions of popular sovereignty which occurred following the Haitian revolution because these contradicted hierarchical theories espoused by Western imperial paradigms. In his estimation, this early-nineteenth-century Haitian movement for sovereignty was viewed by European imperial powers as a contradiction to their understanding of man and of natural law.[17] For Trouillot, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in the western-oriented world-view and palate, and this colonial distaste for Haitian liberty accounts for the persistence of silenced voices in other representations of the topic too.[18] In his estimation, it is only until very recently through the analytical contributions of P. Bourdieu (habitus), M. Foucault (discursive/structural analysis), Fanon (postcolonialism), E. Said (orientalism), and lastly K. Marx (bottom-up history and class identity) that has allowed for the insertion of subaltern scholarship and interdisciplinary (in this case anthropological) approaches which stand in contradiction to modern metanarratives still affected by these arguably archaic dynamics of power.

While Trouillot's three-tiered examination of Colonel Jean-Baptiste San Souci's role in Haitian history looks at various representations occurring in the historical archive, it also recovers lost voices (and three faces) which lay just underneath the historical surface. His treatment of the Haitian Colonel recenters the meta-historical lens away from monumentalized narratives of Haitian history which often ignore the role of the "flip-flopping" loyalist/revolutionary Colonel. By framing the historical narrative around an historically obfuscated figure almost entirely lost in preceding Eurocentric representations of events in the region, Trouillot displays a great reverence for his own past, and a dear concern for future constructions of the Haitian metanarrative in westernized spaces.[19] Furthermore, by introducing his own family narrative and unpacking his position as an avant-garde Haitian-speaking scholar, Trouillot positions himself on the liminal margin of colonial space and historical knowledge production: studied in various western historical topics and approaches, *yet* attached personally to domestically representative historical interpretations of his home country.

If silence is the inevitable product of historical representation, does this underscore a major historical conundrum which an historian will never fully overcome?[20] For Trouillot, *repons lan se wi (the answer is yes)*; no scholar should shy away from this fact in their treatment. Rather, they should still contribute to the epistemology while acknowledging that silence is inherent in the historical knowledge production process. According to Trouillot, this is observable at all levels of the historical guild, and even in popular events like sports broadcasts, where announcers curate narratives for their audience just as historians select the salient details for theirs.

Trouillot's methodology is a case-in-point example of the practice what you preach philosophy mentioned earlier, and indeed Trouillot employs this throughout his narrative(s) not only to treat the Haitian revolution and Colonel San Souci, but to revise metanarratives about The Alamo and the controversial debates surrounding refutation of The Holocaust.[21] Just

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[17] Ibid., 74-77.

[18] See Trouillot's discussion of Jean-Baptiste San Soucie as an exemplary example of an attempt to expose such persistent silences at multiple levels of the historical knowledge production process Ibid., 31-47.

[19] Ibid., 59.

[20] By admitting this, Trouillot is undertaking self-analysis in effect by getting honest about the limitations of historical representation in his, and all works. It is salient here to mention that from his work, it is unclear whether there is any ameliorative to this conundrum.

[21] Ibid., 11-13, 147, 149.

as *The Color of Christ* uses expositional narratives to revise religious and racial history, so too does Trouillot use exposition throughout *Silencing the Past*, to methodologically contradict metanarrative. In the case of representations of Colonel San Souci *and* in the many constructions of Jesus iconography, structures of power are not innocuous, but rather, they are active components of our knowledge construction processes in history and society.[22] While Trouillot's analysis on the structures and processes of power informing the historical knowledge production by the historical guild will not be overstated in this exploration of histories contradicting meta-historical narratives, neither will Blum and Harvey's contribution.

While power structures can augment historical knowledge production and images alike, they also inform historical perspectives. As historian Daniel K. Richter points out in *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*, the traditional vantage-point in the western meta-narrative of conquest in the Americas faces almost exclusively West, and this has the dubious effect of silencing voices of people inextricably linked to the story.[23] According to Richter, previous narratives on Native American and European interactions are problematic because they are written primarily from the perspective of European explorers who viewed themselves on a "mission to civilize" and conquer peoples they characterized as savage and inferior in ideology and policy , but also in the historiography. As Richter posits, westward-facing histories put Native people in a position of exile from their own cultures s in the case of Pocahontas. While these westward facing stories introduced Native people to new traditions, customs, and histories as in the case of Tekakwitha/Catherine they obfuscated the violent colonial animus driving cultural indoctrination and genocide in the European and US colonial projects.[24] To overcome this dilemma, Richter asks his readership to engage in a mental exercise in which they imagine events represented in his work not from Eurocentric position of facing West, but rather from an indigenous and *eastward-facing* vantage-point of perception.[25] For example, in his treatment of explorations of the French explorer Jacques Cartier and Spaniard Francisco Pizarro, we see how the inversion of an historical vantage-point from West-to-East augments dichotomic themes of colonizer histories focusing on a calling to exploit and explore in the name of the colonial metropole into diametrically-constructed themes of invasion and adaptation, power and resistance, and survival and extermination.[26]

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[22] While the title of Trouillot's seminal work may be counterintuitive, the body of his text is a work of historical reckoning and structural analysis: a reassessment of historical understanding through a "measurement" of silences *and* mentions. Reminiscent of E. Said's position-driven approach and stated purpose in *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage: 1978).

[23] Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-10.

[24] Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 69-78, 79-90.

[25] On this point, Richter admits that he is weary of even his ability to accomplish this inversion as he is clear from the onset of the book that unlike the liminal position Trouillot enjoys, he is a Western-trained, white -male modernist who may not have the positionality to accomplish the task as well as the Haitian anthropologist can in his field. For a full discussion on this topic, see Daniel K Richter on Facing East C-SPAN.org, January 22, 2013, accessed March 05, 2018, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4323878/dan-richter...facing-east./

[26] Especially in Eurocentric exceptionalism narratives such as Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 430, "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional."

By undertaking this examination of intercolonial exploration and conquest from the 15th-century to the Jacksonian era (c. 1830's) with indigenous peoples reframed into the narrative at "center-stage," Richter successfully revises a history of a diverse array of Peoples who have long inhabited the continent.[27] Ultimately, by revising the evidence in this way, and by crafting a narrative: "as much about how we might develop eastward-facing stories as about the stories themselves," Richter vindicates a methodology *and* contradicts westward-facing meta narratives in lock-step just as Blum, Harvey, and Trouillot have done in their respective works. Just like Trouillot's work on Jean-Baptiste San Souci reveals negative space in the meta narrative, inverting our historical vantage-point as Richter suggests, unearths nuances that otherwise go overlooked. While indeed Richter's inversion uses very similar source material as previous westward-facing narratives, primary source material in this time and space in history is sparse due to the prevalence of silenced Native voices. All the same, Richter might have utilized more material evidence to supplement his revision. Ultimately, what distinguishes Richter's narrative is his suggested methodological approach, not his utilization of material evidence.[28]

While westward-facing representations inevitably place the agency of European explorers and colonizers (and eventually U.S. colonists) at center-stage of the metahistorical archive, indigenous narratives are relegated to "reservations" of bereaved quietude. Yet it is the subaltern representations that most intimately reveal the harsh consequences of challenging power structures. Ramifications, of this dynamic are revealed in the interactions between the Federal Government and Native peoples and have been since the eighteenth century. For Richter, transferring historical agency to its rightful owner means using a perspective pivot intended ultimately to challenge meta-historical structures *and consequences*. Importantly, this pivot means undermining structures of power, especially those in the U.S. involved in modern land-use debates such as the 1978 Wounded Knee incident in South Dakota and the 2016-2017 fiasco surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline. In these two instances, westward-facing analysis of events starkly contradicts exceptionalism, and colonial and nationalist interpretations.[29]

Confronting structures of power in history means examining the various modes of historical knowledge production with the negative spaces extant in the "dialectic of mentions and silences" which Trouillot posits are inherently extant in the production of history. From him, we learned this also means continuing to make space in the historical guild and archive for emerging subaltern counter narratives. Trouillot systematized contradicting metanarrative in a three-part process, first it is a work of reckoning and activism; second a reassessment of historical understanding through a "measurement" of silence and mention, and third, an assessment of knowledge production with the caveat that power is an active, rather than a

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[27] See Martin Barker and Roger Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth (*Jackson Miss.: University Pr. of Miss., 1996) for a great argument on how to reframe and revise the U.S. meta narrative concerning Native American history using language that opposes colonialist oppression.
[28] This method of inversion is vindicated throughout Richter's work not as an ideal concept, but as a utilized methodology throughout a work which effectively reframes the meta-historical lens on the topic.
[29] Despite my use of the term "incident," I disagree with the characterization of the 1973 events at Wounded Knee as such. Just as with the Dakota Access Pipeline fiasco, these events represent the continuation of policies of *extermination* and *dislocation* by the U.S. Federal Government which arose following the culmination of the French and Indian Wars in 1763 into the present. Also, see Richter (2001, pp. 206-16) for a discussion of 1763 as a turning point in U.S./Native American relations.

passive agent in the process. Confronting meta narratives also means looking various social constructions of race and religion to challenge hierarchy while speaking from a culturally familiar *and* academically knowledgeable position. Last, it means examining history using periphery-core analysis while being open to perspective inversions and negative spaces in our examination of familiar and apparently consensual narratives.[30]

No doubt impacted by my own positionality and habitus, the three texts I have examined present a phenomenological concatenation for your inspection.[31] Yet, I think that the combination of positionality and scholarship we choose matters little *so long as we recognize that the success of contradicting metahistorical narratives rests on the successful confrontation of structures of power*. As we have observed, this presents in measured but qualitative ways, so in terms of the recovery of lost voices in history within the dialectic of discernment, the genre of revision allows us to recognize voices within the constitutive frameworks of power which have inaccurately defined many of those who have come before us. In the historical discipline, one of the truest expressions of this is through the rendering of an historical methodology that in its quintessence, just simply "practices what it preaches." This may also be the best defense against hierarchical archetypes, but who gets to say? To date, there are too many excellent revisions consider here as additions to the three I have selected, so as I close this essay, I'll ask that you consider the three books I've selected amidst the contemporary literature extant to create your own concatenation of methods for revising the past.[32] In closing, there's no doubt that it's a

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[30] See Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *World-systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology* (Ann Arbor, MI: U.M.I. Books on Demand, 1993).

[31] I write as a first-year doctoral student in the history department of the University of Arizona. I recognize here my Anglophilic heritage, and my descendants were from Upstate New York in the 20th-century, and in prior to the 18th-century my descendants resided in Ireland, England, Quebec, and in the Sudetenland of Germany. I was born in Durango, CO in the early nineteen-eighties and lived in Farmington, NM with my parents who'd since recently relocated from Upstate York. For more on habitus influences one's perceived positionality, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and also see ibid., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 101.

[32] The authors and methodologies of contradiction I have brought into dialogue were helpful in my work confronting power structures, but by no means do I argue these should be the only author we consult. While I have focused on three specific texts, there are no doubt many other notable works which participate as revisions operating in this dialectic of discernment I've tried to articulate. In the field of US historiography, see these revisions and methods: for a recent treatment of US history impacted by Daniel K. Richter, see Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. (London: Verso Books, 2019, Pekka Hamalainen *Comanche Empire* (The New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), Thomas G. Andrews, *Coyote Valley: Deep History in the High Rockies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). For works revising the history of technology in the US West, see Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 2016), and also see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2017). For a generally revised treatment and survey of US History, see Jill Lepore, *These Truths: a History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019). Using environmental and spatial analyses for revision in cultural historical treatments in border-space, see Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner, *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). For interdisciplinary decolonization approaches, and Andrew Curley, "The Origin of Legibility." In *Diné Perspectives*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 129. See also ibid., Nick Estes; Jaskiran Dhillon, "Beyond Environmentalism." In *Standing with Standing Rock*.

daunting task to confront structures of power through historical revision, but this study proves there are examples to follow. That said, I hope sharing what I've learned renders you more prepared to problematize power in your own work.

Don Dooley Unger was born in Durango, CO, and has a BA from Fort Lewis College in US History. He earned his MA in History at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in May of 2019 and was awarded the inaugural 2019 Emerging Historians Award from the Colorado State Historical Association for his historiographical essay, "An History of the World's Greatest Gold Camp" (published in History Colorado Online, Feb, 2021). Don has a wide portfolio of museum, archival, and editorial experience. After working briefly as a lecturer at the University of Colorado, Don relocated to Tucson where he pursues a doctoral degree in History at U of A as a Graduate Associate. Don's contribution to the field of Environmental history is twofold, and as he says, he is passionate about stewardship in a region where much mining has occurred, but also about the place where he was born. Through problematizing mining narratives, Don aims to center and recover voices involved in the history of mining and environmental recovery on the Colorado Plateau in order to make head way in the field of Critical Reclamation Studies. As such, Don' s work is connective, and it integrates a slew of interdisciplinary approaches in new and established fields such as Environmental History, Geology, Geography, American Indian Studies, and Disposal Studies. Don also studies the language of Diné (Navajo), and most enjoys working with students and faculty in various forums as a Graduate Associate.

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 158. For an anthropologic-historic revision focusing on colonizer power systems and colonized impacts, see Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History: with a New Preface* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

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