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Examining the Pedagogy of Community-Based Heritage Work through an International Public History Field Experience

Alicia Ebbitt McGill

ABSTRACT: This article provides a model for an international community-based public history field experience, with a university student-engagement case study in two Belizean communities. This field experience involved experiential education, interdisciplinary research, and collaboration between American and Belizean university students; public history, cultural anthropology, and archaeology scholars; US and Belizean institutions; and community residents. Resulting products included an exhibit on local cultural heritage and educational materials. I explore the pedagogical and scholarly utility of the field experience to public history by discussing the educational process, project results, and student learning outcomes, highlighting in particular contributions to student training and engaged scholarship.

KEY WORDS: public history education, international public history, field experience, cultural heritage studies, community-based research

The international field research experience is a long-standing model for training university students, especially in the discipline of anthropology.¹ In this article, I explore the field experience model's pedagogical utility for training in the field of public history when combined with community engagement. I discuss the educational process, project components and results, and student learning outcomes of an international community-based public history field experience conducted in 2016 in the African-descendant Kriol communities of Crooked Tree and Biscayne in Belize. This field experience involved experiential education, interdisciplinary research, community engagement, and collaboration between

¹ In anthropology, these experiences are also called "field schools." They involve student training in ethnographic and/or archaeological research methods. Special sections and issues in anthropology journals, such as "Special Reflections from the Field: Mentoring Apprentice Ethnographers through Field Schools," special section, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1999): 210–53 and "Passages: The Ethnographic Field School and First Fieldwork," special issue, *NAPA Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2004), provide a range of field school case studies and highlight a range of intellectual, cultural, and personal benefits of such field experiences.

American and Belizean university students and scholars of public history, cultural anthropology, and archaeology along with participation from Belizean institutions and community residents. The products developed through the field experience included an exhibit on Kriol cultural heritage and local history, educational outreach with two primary schools, and an open house that showcased our team's work.

As the field of public history diversifies and internationalizes,² with more US-based public historians working internationally and more scholars becoming aware of public history work taking place across the globe, and as community-based research becomes increasingly common in public history and anthropology, field experiences in international community contexts provide valuable training opportunities for future practitioners. I define international public history as work that involves public historians working outside their country of origin and/or examinations of public history practices throughout the world. International public history is valuable on methodological and theoretical levels, by bringing multi-velocity to disciplines that study the past, enabling scholars to understand the range of factors that affect studies of the past in diverse contexts, and incorporating a variety of methodological tools for practicing public history. Community-based field experiences involve interdisciplinarity, cultural exchange, and intellectual reflection. They also enable students to develop deep understandings of the ways people connect with the past. These benefits meet noted university needs to revise curricula and programs to better prepare future generations of heritage professionals for a range of career options through applied projects, community and institutional engagement, and hands-on training.³ To highlight benefits of the field experience model and discuss specific project components, I incorporate the voices of my graduate students with quotations from their field notes.⁴ I also provide details about our interactions with community members.

2 The first international public history organization, the International Federation for Public History (IFPH), was founded in 2010. International Federation for Public History, "IFPH-FIHP Bylaws," IFPH website, <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/sample-page/ifph-bylaws-fihp-statuts>. For a discussion about interests in international public history foci, see Zachary McKiernan, "The Utility of an International Vision of Public History," *History@Work* (blog), February 4, 2013, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/the-utility-of-an-international-vision-of-public-history/>.

3 See Susan Bender and George Smith, eds., *Teaching Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Society for American Archaeology Press, 2000); Benjamin Filene, "Passionate Histories: 'Outsider' History-Makers and What They Teach Us," *The Public Historian* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 11–33; Phyllis E. Messenger and Susan Bender, eds., *History and Approaches in Heritage Studies and Pedagogy and Practice in Heritage Studies* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, forthcoming); and Robert Weyeneth and Daniel J. Vivian, "Charting the Course: Challenges in Public History Education, Guidance for Developing Strong Public History Programs," *The Public Historian* 38, no. 3 (August 2016): 25–49.

4 Given the focus of this article on the pedagogical value of field experiences, I draw primarily from the students' field notes. Student quotes also came from our presentation at the fourteenth annual Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium (BAAS), June 29, 2016. The students gave me permission to draw from their field notes.

Project Background

In many ways, the projects our team completed in the international community-based public history field experience were over ten years in the making. My academic background is in cultural anthropology, archaeology, and critical heritage studies.⁵ I was trained in the traditions of public and community archaeology, where practitioners engage communities in the research process.⁶ In 2005, I began working in Crooked Tree Village with the Chau Hiix Archaeological Project (CHAP). In 2007, I began ethnographic research in Biscayne Village as a comparative study site.

Crooked Tree and Biscayne Villages are located in north-central Belize, approximately thirty miles from Belize City, which is the largest city in the country and is situated on the Caribbean coast. People have lived in the region for several thousands of years, including Maya peoples who occupied the area continuously from as early as 1100 BCE⁷ and established the first urban centers in the area. In the early 1700s, British loggers began forcibly bringing enslaved African people to the region to increase productivity in timber extraction. Small logwood-cutting outposts, inhabited by loggers and enslaved people, existed in and around Crooked Tree in the mid to late 1700s. Larger formal settlements formed in Crooked Tree in the early 1840s with the establishment of a Baptist church and school in 1843.⁸ Residents from Crooked Tree founded Biscayne, located one mile south of Crooked Tree on Belize's Northern Highway, in the late 1970s. Today, the majority of Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents identify as ethnically Kriol (descendants of freed and enslaved Africans and British colonists).

Crooked Tree is located on an island surrounded by seasonal lagoons, accessible by a 3.5 mile dirt causeway from the Northern Highway. The lagoons are part of a complex wetlands environment, home to a vast diversity of plants and animals, including waterfowl that are major tourist attractions. The lagoon system was designated the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary in 1984 and is currently comanaged by the Belizean government and the Belize Audubon Society (BAS).

5 I define heritage as the myriad ways people engage with and utilize manifestations of the past (including, but not limited to, cultural sites, objects, traditions, stories, and ideas). With a critical heritage studies lens, I recognize the constructed, dialogical, performative, political, and processual nature of heritage. In my research, I explore ways individuals, groups, institutions, and nation-states use the concept of heritage to make meaning in and of the present, with attention to how disciplines that study "the past" are implicated in the ways the past is defined, managed, and utilized. For more definitions of heritage and theories in critical heritage studies, see Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013); Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, "Framing Theory: Towards a Critical Imagination in Heritage Studies," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, no. 6 (2013): 546–61.

6 See for examples, Linda Derry and Maureen Malloy, eds., *Archaeologists and Local Communities: Partners in Exploring the Past* (Washington, DC: Society for American Archaeology Press, 2003); and Yvonne Marshall, "What Is Community Archaeology?," *World Archaeology* 34, no. 2 (2002): 211–19.

7 For more about ancient Maya occupation in the area, see K. Anne Pyburn, "The Hydrology of Chau Hiix," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 14, no. 1 (2003): 123–29.

8 For more about early Kriol settlements, see Melissa Johnson, "Nature and Progress in Rural Creole Belize: Rethinking Sustainable Development" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1998).

The CHAP (1989–2007) involved extensive public archaeology efforts from its inception; community residents invited archaeologists to conduct research at the nearby Chau Hiix Maya site and made decisions about who was hired to carry out fieldwork.⁹ Project members organized educational outreach with regional schools and site open houses at the end of field seasons. Due to the Maya archaeology expertise of the project director, and villagers' interests in Maya archaeotourism, the CHAP did not focus much on Kriol heritage and recent history.

In my dissertation, I examined the impacts of archaeology in the region, Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents' interests in Maya archaeology, and the ways villagers learn about Belizean cultural heritage (e.g., through schools, archaeology, and cultural centers). I also learned about a nearly exclusive focus in Belizean archaeology and archaeotourism on ancient Maya heritage.¹⁰ Crooked Tree residents frequently expressed to me their interests in having more information about village culture and history in public spaces, which inspired the project described in this article.

In 2013, I joined the public history faculty in the North Carolina State University (NC State) Department of History. We began offering a public history PhD program in 2014, with foci including international public history and heritage studies. My role as a public history faculty member combined with my findings on Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents' heritage interests inspired me to seek out resources for a six-week international public history field experience, in which students would be trained to work with community actors to develop an exhibit and educational outreach. Two NC State public history graduate students (Lisa Withers and Hannah Scruggs—identified by first names below) accompanied me to Belize in summer 2016.¹¹

Community-based heritage work benefits from multidisciplinary expertise and resources. I partnered with archaeologist Eleanor (Ellie) Harrison-Buck, faculty in the Department of Anthropology at University of New Hampshire (UNH), who had recently started archaeological research in and around Biscayne and Crooked Tree villages and wanted to make community connections in the area. We received partial funding from UNH to support the project exhibit and Ellie's archaeological research, and we included UNH undergraduates in the field experience. I directed

9 Alicia Ebbitt McGill, "Situating Public Archaeology in Crooked Tree, Belize," in *Public Participation in Archaeology*, ed. Joanne Lea and Suzie Thomas (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2014); K. Anne Pyburn, "Archaeology for a New Millennium: The Rules of Engagement," in *Archaeologists and Local Communities: Partners in Exploring the Past*, ed. Linda Derry and Maureen Malloy (Washington, DC: Society for American Archaeology Press, 2003), 167–84.

10 Alicia Beth Ebbitt McGill, "Aal a wi da wan? Cultural Education, Heritage, and Citizenship in the Belizean State" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2012).

11 I recruited graduate student applicants for the field experience in fall 2015. Applicants submitted a personal statement, transcripts, CV, and letter of recommendation. Hannah and Lisa were chosen because of their strong applications and research interests in African diaspora heritage. Hannah received internship credit, a requirement of our program, and Lisa, who had already done an internship, participated to gain international research experience. This project was also designed to test a model of an international internship for our curriculum.

community-based aspects of our field experience, including the development of the exhibit, community and institutional engagement efforts, educational programming, and student training in ethnographic, public history, and heritage methods and concepts. Lisa did much of the exhibit design and wrote the majority of the exhibit text. Hannah conducted outreach at the Crooked Tree and Biscayne government schools and designed curricular resources to accompany the exhibit. Ellie directed archaeological research in western Belize and nearby survey work to identify historic logging sites and early settlements (with assistance from Satoru Murata, Alex Gantos, and UNH undergraduates). Ellie's archaeology team also contributed text and images about their research to the exhibit. Two UNH anthropology undergraduates (Grace Dietz and Katherine Pendleton) and two Belizean undergraduates from Galen University (Elissa Waight and Arrian Dougal) joined the NC State team's community-based field experience for several weeks, contributing to the project by conducting focus groups with community members, taking photographic and video footage, and doing school outreach.

Field Experience Structure

Though the field experience is not a staple in public history as in other disciplines, internships are increasingly standard in public history training. Internships and field experiences extend learning outside of the classroom, enable time for community engagement, and allow students to hone and utilize skills applicable to a multitude of settings (e.g., academia, museums, archives, historic preservation, community activism, and policy work).

Field experiences differ from internships in many ways, including that students are culturally immersed in an often unfamiliar social context and engage in extensive cross-cultural exchange. Field experiences and internships also involve different concepts of the client relationship. Often, in an internship students produce a product for an institutional client. This institution might involve multiple stakeholders, but the interactions students have with those stakeholders are often structured and mediated through the institution. In a field experience, relationships with stakeholders are usually more personalized, informal, and social, enabling students to understand the meta-cognition of stakeholders (e.g., how they perceive themselves and their needs), but also teaching students the complexities of community-based initiatives in which parties have varying expectations, resources, and commitments. Field experiences are also often long-term and intensive initiatives that build off prior research.

Interdisciplinarity was a key aim for our international community-based public history field experience. I structured the project to combine humanities and social sciences perspectives and model multiple disciplines in methodology, content, and driving philosophies (primarily public history, anthropology, and heritage studies). I followed a university engagement model advocated by public historians and anthropologists, wherein partnerships are created with university entities and

students are trained in community-based research methods and introduced to the implications of what they research.¹² These interdisciplinary structures of our project necessitated that interactions with Belizean community members be a central guide to the content of our project, about which I provide more details later.

Through the field experience, students learned and used an ethnographic approach to studying heritage.¹³ Ethnography is a principal methodology in anthropology, used to systematically study and interpret cultural practices through observations of and participation in the daily life and cultural activities of communities.¹⁴ As such, ethnographic perspectives contribute additional analytical angles to public history research, because they enable deep and contextual cultural examinations of the ways humans connect with the past, such as how cultural heritage knowledge and resources affect people and how people rework historic conditions to suit present needs. Ethnography also offers methods for assessing the needs and interests of various stakeholders, exploring the practices of heritage institutions, and collecting information about the cultural strategies by which claims to the past are made. In our project, we used semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders and participant observation¹⁵ at cultural centers and events to collect information from community leaders and young people, which was used to direct the content of our products.

Drawing from public history methods and models for “nearby history,”¹⁶ the historical themes we explored were influenced by local narratives about historical events, people, and developments. These themes were selected and studied through interviews, focus groups, and archival research. Finally, the exhibit component of our program was informed by suggestions for a “participatory museum,”¹⁷ the

¹² For discussion about university engagement, see Steven B. Burg, “From Troubled Ground to Common Ground: The Locust Grove African-American Cemetery Restoration Project: A Case Study of Service-Learning and Community History,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 51–82; and Jean J. Schensul, “Engaged Universities, Community Based-Research Organizations and Third Sector Science in a Global System,” *Human Organization* 69, no. 4 (2010): 307–20. For community-based research methods and examples, see Sonya Atalay, *Community-Based Archaeology: Research with, by, and for Indigenous and Local Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Joanne Lea and Suzie Thomas, eds., *Public Participation in Archaeology* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2014).

¹³ See Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Lena Mortensen and Julie Hollowell, eds., *Ethnographies and Archaeologies: Iterations of the Past* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); and Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Ethnography is also a discursive and descriptive process. The written products of ethnographic fieldwork are also called ethnography, and ethnographic writings include emic and etic interpretations of cultural groups and practices.

¹⁵ Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2010); Harry F. Wolcott *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2008).

¹⁶ David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past around You*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2010).

¹⁷ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010).

concept of museums as “contact zones,”¹⁸ and ideas about museums as decolonized spaces.¹⁹ We thought about the role of exhibits beyond formal museum spaces, tried to balance the interests of visitors, community stakeholders, and scholars, and worked toward creating materials that provided information, were provocative, and inspired interaction.²⁰ Later, I discuss some of the ways the exhibit incorporated such museum studies perspectives.

The International Community-Based Public History Field Experience

Training for the NC State graduate students began six months prior to entering the field with monthly and eventually biweekly meetings. Our meetings were not part of a formal credited course; instead, I structured them as an independent study, assigning readings about Belizean history, Kriol culture, ethnographic methods, research ethics, and heritage issues in Belize. Additionally, Hannah and Lisa practiced ethnographic observation and journaling before departing for Belize. During meetings we brainstormed ideas for exhibit themes based on the readings, and we met with an NC State colleague, Tammy Gordon, to discuss ways to develop informative, provocative, and engaging exhibits. Lisa said, “It was really beneficial to have a foundation about where we were going and the community we were going to work with before arriving. . . . While we did not know how our end product would take shape given we did not yet know anyone in the community, the readings provided a foundation in which we could have key questions in mind to center conversations.”²¹

Given that our project was centered in rural Belizean Kriol communities, immersing and familiarizing the students with Kriol culture and heritage was a primary objective. The NC State graduate students completed several days of Kriol language lessons with a cultural expert from the National Kriol Council.²² All project members participating in ethnography and community-based research

18 James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188–219; Harriet Purkis, “Making Contact in an Exhibition Zone: Displaying Contemporary Cultural Diversity in Donegal, Ireland, through an Installation of Visual and Material Portraits,” *Museum & Society* 11, no. 1 (2013): 50–67.

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

20 Freeman Tilden provides guidelines for engaging diverse audiences through interpretation. Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

21 Lisa Withers, BAAS presentation, June 29, 2016.

22 Potential language barriers are important to consider when developing an international public history program. Some ways to address language barriers include providing students with language lessons prior to and/or during the program and involving participants who are fluent in multiple languages and can serve as intermediaries and educational resources. The national language of Belize is English, but the students honed Kriol language skills throughout the field experience. I asked community members we engaged with to teach the students Kriol words and phrases and the Belizean undergraduates enthusiastically shared Kriol language knowledge with the team.

Doing home visits to learn about Kriol culture. Hannah Scruggs with Gloria Tillett. (Photo courtesy of Lisa Withers)

were based in Crooked Tree.²³ Students were oriented to the physical and cultural landscape there through home visits and participation in community events to help them get to know the community through the eyes and voices of its residents. Students also honed their ethnographic, participant observation, interview, and community history skills through engagements with villagers.

In the home visits, people shared knowledge about Kriol culture and Crooked Tree history. The home visits were informal; we did not always have explicit information we were seeking, and the practice of home visits fit with Kriol cultural norms. Over time, the students began to understand the value of the home visits and importance of patience and allowing people to share cultural knowledge on their terms. In her notebook, Lisa reflected on one particular visit: “We visited the Crawfords and it finally clicked with me how social visits fit into research. I learned about . . . the uses of sour sap even though it’s not commonly found in Crooked Tree, got advice about [the need to] keep practicing cooking, and learned about

²³ We installed the exhibit in the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary visitor center and were based in Crooked Tree, but our team engaged with community leaders in Crooked Tree and Biscayne (e.g., school principals, church elders, and village council members) and worked in the schools in both villages.

Learning by doing. The field experience team learns how to “pick out” cashew seed at the home of Terese Tillett and Landis Wade. (Photo courtesy of Katherine Pendleton)

a worm that can make you really sick. In the states, we are used to setting an appointment and getting right to the point of our questions. I’m beginning to understand how a social visit can be just as beneficial to humanities/social science research as a formal meeting.”²⁴

We participated in a range of community events to further familiarize the project team with local culture, history, and politics, network with residents, and learn about aspects of heritage to highlight in project products. For example, we introduced our project in a public village council meeting to connect with interested villagers. We also attended church services and village events such as a cricket match and Cashew Harvest (a celebration of cashew bounty and church fund-raising event). To learn more about what makes Crooked Tree unique and participate in the village’s tourism economy, we went on a bird tour with local guides and engaged in aspects of cashew seed production. We also toured a village farm to learn about the diversity of environmental resources. Lisa noted, “we were able to have a farm tour from meeting the owner at the village council meeting which is a testament to the importance of networking as a part of community engagement projects.”²⁵

The value of participant observation and networking to public history was an important lesson for the students. As a team, we visited cultural and historical

²⁴ Withers, field notes, June 2, 2016.

²⁵ Withers, BAAS presentation.

institutions, including the Belize Audubon Society, Museum of Belize, Institute for Social and Cultural Research (ISCR), and Lamanai Archaeological Site. We also met with a colleague from the University of South Florida and some of his project partners to learn about an initiative to create a community museum in the Garifuna (a Caribbean-based Afro-Indigenous ethnicity) village of Seine Bight, Belize.²⁶ Exchanges with cultural institutions helped our team identify challenges and limitations facing stakeholder groups and institutions, better understand the complex relationships between institutions and rural villages, and navigate community politics. The BAS was a key partner in our project as they co-manage the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (CTWS) with the government of Belize. However, since the establishment of the CTWS, the BAS has had a complicated relationship with Crooked Tree residents,²⁷ and we were sensitive to this complex history when meeting with both BAS and Crooked Tree actors.

Our exposure to interpretative materials at Belizean cultural centers and conversations with Belizean and foreign heritage practitioners added another layer to the university students' learning process, revealing how cultural, political, and historical factors affect and challenge heritage efforts. For example, through conversations with government and museum officials, we learned how practitioners in the ISCR navigate complex racial histories and cultural politics in heritage projects. In a meeting with Sherilyne Jones (former director of the Museum of Belize), she suggested that "colonial brainwashing and revisionist history" led to an aversion among many Belizeans to engage with Belize's history of slavery. She spoke with us about how the museum staff dealt with this in the development of an exhibit on the history of slavery in the region by contextualizing Belize in a broader historical, cultural, and economic context. After our meeting, Hannah remarked that Sherilyne had "so much insight on issues facing Belizean history."²⁸ Such cross-cultural exchanges between current heritage practitioners and future public historians are valuable because they allow opportunities for young scholars to see what public history looks like in diverse contexts.²⁹ According to Lisa, the institutional exchanges in the field experience "allowed us . . . to gain an international perspective to [public history]," to "see how similar public history is conducted in another

²⁶ Eric Koenig, E. Christian Wells, and Sarita Garcia, "Reclaiming Development: Community-Based Heritage Conservation and University-Engaged Research," in *Research Reports in Belizean History and Anthropology: Papers of the 2015 Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium*, ed. Nigel Encalada, Rolando Cocom, Selene Solis, and Giovanni Pinelo (Belmopan, Belize: Institute for Social and Cultural Research, 2016), 63–75.

²⁷ See Johnson, "Nature and Progress in Rural Creole Belize."

²⁸ Hannah Scruggs, field notes, May 19, 2016.

²⁹ For examples, see Julia Brock, "Museums Connect Grants and Contact Zones," *Curator* 58, no. 2 (April 2015): 133–35; Julia Brock, Jennifer Dickey, Catherine Lewis, and Samir El Azhar, "Exploring Identities: Public History in a Cross-Cultural Context," *The Public Historian* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 9–29; and Na Li and Martha A. Sandweiss, "Teaching Public History: A Cross-Cultural Experiment: The First Public History Faculty Training Program in China," *The Public Historian* 38, no. 3 (August 2016): 78–100.

country,” and gave us “exposure to a variety of ways history and culture are interpreted in different countries.”³⁰

This “international perspective” involved learning about the importance of partnering with a range of institutions, as well as the unique problems those institutions face. The process of gaining international perspectives also involved exposure to the contexts that shape public history work and the impacts of cultural politics on studies of the past. Our team had numerous discussions with each other and stakeholders about how history is interpreted in Belize, including colonial legacies that persist in contexts such as textbooks and museums. Lisa and Hannah were struck by the heavy emphasis on the ancient Maya and archaeology, especially at the Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium we attended at the end of the field experience. They were also surprised by the fact that few Belizean museums we visited had interpretative materials that addressed the history of slavery in Belize or the African diasporic heritage of the country. We had many conversations about why this was the case, why things were different in the United States, and what the impacts and implications were for museum and public history work in the differing contexts. These conversations also translated into some of our ideas for the exhibit.

Documenting Community History and Heritage

University students documented, disseminated, and promoted community history in various ways during our project, through engagement with stakeholders, the development of an exhibit and educational outreach, and an exhibit open house. Chip Colwell and T. J. Ferguson outline a framework for a collaboration continuum to describe the range in types of community-based archaeological research.³¹ Within this framework, our field experience fell under the category of “Participation,” with some components of “Collaboration.” We achieved community participation through efforts to meet the goals of multiple stakeholders, which included meetings with institutions and community elders to gauge interests in the exhibit, identify themes people wanted highlighted, and gather content. We also engaged primary schoolchildren to collect materials and ideas for exhibit panels and held an open house to share the results of the field experience with many stakeholders and gather feedback. We achieved community collaboration through a free flow of information, jointly developing goals for the exhibit with stakeholders such as the BAS and schools and collaboration with villagers in the acquisition of material culture to incorporate into the exhibit (e.g., community members voluntarily informed us about objects and photos they had that they wanted us to include).

I used my knowledge of the long history of community-based research in Crooked Tree to direct the structure of community engagements in our field

³⁰ Withers, BAAS presentation.

³¹ Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and T. J. Ferguson, eds., *Collaboration in Archaeological Practice: Engaging Descendant Communities* (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2008), 11.

experience. Based on my knowledge of local cultural norms and past community projects, I determined that the most culturally appropriate way to gather community input about the exhibit was through informal home visits and small focus groups. As a team we identified target stakeholders with whom to consult, including village council members, community elders, business owners, and project partners such as BAS staff. We conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to document community perspectives on local culture and history that centered on the questions: What do you think visitors and youth should know about Crooked Tree/Biscayne? What information do you want preserved? What roles do you see an exhibit playing in the community? Though we did not conduct formal oral histories, we used approaches from community history in conversations to identify historic themes of interest to community members.

Lisa designed the exhibit and wrote the majority of the panels, but we consulted as a team about our data and emerging themes, which came from historical and cultural scholarship about the community contexts, interactions, and conversations with Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents and participation in community events. Many community residents expressed interest in highlighting local history, changes over time, and long-standing traditions, and in sharing information across generations—thus, the overarching theme we chose for the exhibit was: “Crooked Tree Then and Now.”

Lisa applied a range of museological perspectives to create community stakeholder-centric exhibit materials that balanced diverse needs and interests and captivated exhibit audiences.³² She used accounts from villagers to direct the content of many panels, incorporating local stories, historical and current images of residents and prominent community figures, and artwork and stories of young people. She balanced text with visually stimulating images such as those of community members processing cashews.

Because villagers emphasized to our team the need to create a space for stories about how their communities came to be and changed over time, we focused several panels on aspects of rural Kriol culture and history. Through conversations with community members, the university students learned how the local environment shapes peoples’ ways of life, and Lisa carried this theme through many panels, such as one on changes in transportation over time and one on early industries. Crooked Tree and Biscayne residents’ narratives also challenged historical stereotypes. We specifically collected information about local foodways that challenged the stereotype that “Kriol noh gat noh kolcha” (Kriols don’t have culture). For example, Lisa designed an entire section of the exhibit about cashew processing, as Crooked Tree is known as the “Village of the Cashew.” Elders wanted young people to understand the legacies of labor locally. One community elder, Mr.

³² John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009); Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Simon, *Participatory Museum*.

Early Industry in Crooked Tree: Chicle

In the early days, community members harvested chicle from sapodilla trees.

Chicle is the main ingredient for chewing gum and is harvested from sapodilla trees. Hill Bank and Gallon Jug were two sites where community members from Crooked Tree harvested chicle in the mid-1900s.

To harvest chicle, a person climbed up the tree and cut the bark with a machete to allow the sap to run down into a bag. The sap was boiled in a large pot then shaped into cubes for shipping as shown in the drawing.

Drawing courtesy of
Nyron
Standard VI
Crooked Tree
Government School

Exhibit panel about chicle processing. (Panel courtesy of Alicia McGill, written by Lisa Withers)

Godwin Westby, detailed the tasks involved in the chicle process. Another, Miss Evangeline Gillett, told us all about her family's legacy of raising cattle. With this information and inspiration, Lisa created panels about these industries, integrating drawings from young people that illustrated cultural practices and photographs that were loaned by community members. In previous work, I frequently heard nostalgic stories about Crooked Tree Government School and the 1950s-era schoolhouse, which no longer stands. During the 2016 field experience, an elder from Biscayne, Pastor Hugh Tillett, told Belizean students stories about the development of Biscayne in which the school featured prominently. Given the significance of education in both communities, we created exhibit panels about schooling in the past and present. We also highlighted Chau Hiix and the ancient Maya in the

Early Industry In Crooked Tree: Logging & Cattle

Crooked Tree Villagers have a long history of working in logging camps and raising cattle.

Belize is known for its logging industries. The earliest logging industry was logwood used to make indigo dye. Later, villagers harvested hardwood trees like mahogany. Residents from Crooked Tree worked at logging camps cutting down trees in pairs using heavy saws.

Starting in the mid-1900s, some villagers began raising cattle on open grassland in the village and west of the village in the area known as Blackburn. Families still raise cattle in Crooked Tree in these areas today.

Reuben Gillett tending to cattle.
Image courtesy of Evangeline Gillett.

Exhibit panel about raising cattle. (Panel courtesy of Alicia McGill, written by Lisa Withers)

exhibit because people told many stories about their experiences working at “da rooinz.”³³ To Lisa, panels about Chau Hiix emphasized the “dual importance of the village [location] throughout history—for both Maya and Kriol [peoples]” and connected “the village to a longer heritage in the region and national history.”³⁴

In addition to the exhibit, our international public history field experience included engagement with adolescents through outreach at the Crooked Tree and Biscayne government primary schools. Directed by Hannah Scruggs and carried

³³ Rooinz is the Kriol word for ruins, which is a common way of referring to archaeological sites in Belize.

³⁴ Lisa Withers, team meeting notes, May 27, 2016.

“Striving for Excellence” and “Education is Our Future” CTGS and BGS Today

Today the Crooked Tree and Biscayne Government Schools are centers of exciting activity.

In addition to regular classes at the primary schools in Crooked Tree and Biscayne, a variety of exciting activities take place throughout the year. These include a field day for International Children’s Day, the national Festival of the Arts, spelling bees, sporting events, and social studies competitions. Every year both schools do well in the regional competitions and on the national standardized tests. In 2014, Ashton Tillett of Crooked Tree topped the country with the highest Primary School Exam. The entire village celebrated this accomplishment. CTGS organized a parade and the Minister of Education at the time, the Honorable Patrick Faber, attended the primary school graduation.

Left: Ashton Tillett giving his speech at CTGS graduation 2014.

Right: Honorable Patrick Faber at CTGS graduation 2014.

Exhibit panel about education today and prominent figures in Belize and Crooked Tree. (Panel courtesy of Alicia McGill, written by Alicia McGill)

out by Hannah and the program undergraduates, this work enabled the collection of information for the exhibit and development of project educational resources.

Hannah had previous experience in a youth-based community oral history project through AmeriCorps in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was excited to transfer these learned skills to our project. Hannah was particularly interested in collecting narratives from people of many age groups and connecting people across generations. She developed questions to ask Belizean youth based on what she learned through home visits, drew from what older villagers identified as important regarding village history and culture, and gave primary school students topics to

discuss with older family members. Rather than taking a common “deficit model” approach in heritage (assuming students needed to be informed about the significance of local history and culture),³⁵ Hannah worked from the assumption that young people have insightful perspectives about cultural heritage. To learn about these perspectives, Hannah and the undergraduates posed questions to the Belizean students about their lives, traditions, communities, and cultural and environmental heritage. The answers to these questions revealed enduring and personal ways the students and their families engage with heritage through hunting, fishing, and sports. Hannah wrote, “We talked to the kids about growing up in Biscayne. They told us about fishing, folk stories, and what they like to do on the weekends. We had them draw pictures of the things that they do and that make them think of Biscayne.”³⁶

Young peoples’ voices and interests were incorporated into the exhibit in several ways: with their artwork, panels focused on topics that were important to them (farming, food, sports), and excerpts from stories about growing up from a “Why I love Crooked Tree” essay contest. One of the students, Arnold, said, “I also love living in Crooked Tree because of my farm. I love my farm because the wild life you can see there are beautiful. The best reason why I love farming is because I love to ride the horses and feed the cows with cashew and milkweed. I also love it because you can see the beautiful deer feeding and foxes.”

The incorporation of student work provided opportunities for youth to show off their work and to be engaged with the open house. The essay stories also connected with community elders’ interests in focusing the exhibit on “the Olden Days” and change over time. Based on her interactions with the primary school students and conversations with community members about the exhibit and their educational interests, Hannah designed a curricular guide for teachers to accompany the exhibit. The guide included summaries of exhibit content, suggestions for discussion questions and activities, and worksheets and coloring pages.

Our team shared the final products of our international community-based public history field experience with Crooked Tree and Biscayne villagers in an open house. At the event, visitors did exhibit walk-throughs, watched video clips of cashew processing, looked at old photos of CHAP research and events, learned about Maya and colonial artifacts, and heard from a Crooked Tree expert on bush medicine³⁷ who shared traditional ecological knowledge. For me, the successes of the international community-based public history field experience could not only be seen in the exhibit panels and educational products produced but also in the excitement the program generated. Over one hundred people attended the open

35 Tim Schadla-Hall, “Public Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century,” in *A Future for Archaeology: The Past in the Present*, ed. Robert Layton, Stephen Shennan, and Peter Stone (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2006): 75–82.

36 Scruggs, field notes, June 2, 2016.

37 Bush is the Kriol word used to refer to the forest or the jungle and bush medicine refers to folk uses of plants.

Visitors at the exhibit open house. (Photo courtesy of Dru McGill)

house, including several representatives from national heritage and conservation organizations. The panels inspired cross-community and cross-generational connections centered on Kriol culture and heritage. Stakeholders frankly shared their opinions about the exhibit and ideas for future projects. One Crooked Tree elder, Miss Verla Jex, who in previous years was ambivalent about my research, made it a point to tell me the exhibit evoked nostalgic emotions for her. Several visitors expressed strong interests in mentioning peoples' names and including more images of specific community members. We focused on a few individuals in the exhibit, but we became aware that people and families did not want anonymity—they wanted their family members to be highlighted. This realization inspired our team to think about future research and exhibits that could focus on genealogies and place Crooked Tree, Biscayne, and their residents in the broader context of Belizean history.

Reflections from the Field

Initiatives such as our international community-based public history field experience in Belize provide a useful model for graduate and undergraduate education in public history. I now reflect on benefits of the field experience, including

Institutional partners at the exhibit open house. (Photo courtesy of Dru McGill)

refinement and application of a broad range of humanities and social sciences skills and theories, interdisciplinary learning, and cross-cultural exchange. I also examine the ways such exchanges enabled our project students to learn about societal factors that contribute to the human experience, such as race, ethnicity, and class, and how these factors are related to cultural politics in Belize and “at home.”³⁸

Putting Theory into Practice

Through ethnographic and historical research, plus community involvement, project university students honed and utilized an elaborate skill set identified by the American Historical Association as key for success in a range of jobs (e.g.,

³⁸ In discussions about the learning experiences of university students in ethnographic field schools, scholars address the ways students develop sophisticated understandings of social issues in new cultural contexts and examine and question their own cultural backgrounds with new perspectives. See George Gmelch, “Lessons from the Field,” in *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. James Spradley and David W. McCurdy (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 46–57. Through field experiences, especially those with community engagement, students also consider their subjectivity and positionality, their influences on research, and discover more about themselves as people and professionals. See Rebecca L. H. Berman, “Lessons from the Navajo: The Impact of a ‘Good’ Field Experience on a Career,” *NAPA Bulletin* 22 (2004): 128–41.

communication, collaboration, and intellectual self-confidence).³⁹ Specifically, project students practiced engaging with Belizean community actors about their heritage needs and interests, explored ways to share cultural knowledge about local history and culture with diverse publics, and became comfortable developing interpretative materials.

Working in a vastly different cultural context, the students learned to be flexible and adaptive to varied conditions and resources. For example, the process of designing, printing, and installing an exhibit in Belize was challenging. Lisa had to consider how high heat and humidity would affect the exhibit materials. She consulted with project institutional collaborators to learn where they print exhibits and chose plastic for panels over local natural materials to ensure physical sustainability. Additionally, specific hooks and nails that are standard in the United States were not available in Belizean hardware stores, so Lisa adapted and quickly came up with creative solutions for hanging exhibit materials.

The university students applied public history, anthropology, heritage studies, and museological concepts in ways they could not in a traditional classroom setting. In the development of the project materials, the students balanced multiple community and institutional perspectives and created inclusive interpretations of cultural heritage that highlighted the perspectives of a range of Kriol peoples. Through institutional exchanges and attendance at the Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium (BAAS), the students witnessed conflicting perspectives about uses of cultural heritage and impacts of a Maya archaeology-centric “authorized heritage discourse”⁴⁰ on institutional constructions of national heritage and individual constructions of Kriol heritage. In these applied learning contexts, the students came to understand how scholars who study the past are embedded in complex heritage practices in global, national, and regional contexts. At the BAAS, we attended a meeting of scholars interested in community-based heritage work. In Lisa’s field notes about the meeting she noted that several Belizean practitioners expressed concern that Belizeans need to be at the forefront of community projects. Lisa reflected on the colonial legacies of heritage work and the tensions related to foreign-run projects. Lisa wrote, “Even community-based projects bring with them colonial aspects due to their design with a dependence on a foreign component. Are there Belizean-initiated projects represented at the [BAAS] meeting? Can true community projects exist with foreign university/institution involvement as the principal player?”⁴¹

39 American Historical Association, “The Career Diversity Five Skills,” <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/career-diversity-for-historians/career-diversity-resources/five-skills>.

40 Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.

41 Withers, field notes, June 29, 2016.

Disciplinary Reflections

The interdisciplinary components of the field experience were particularly beneficial for me and the graduate students in helping us understand how different disciplines engage with the term heritage. In early preparations for our field experience, we read and talked about definitions and theories of heritage, including those expressing wariness of heritage constructions and manipulations⁴² and calls for more diverse understandings of heritage.⁴³ I provided the graduate students with scholarship about heritage issues throughout Belizean history so they could understand how cultural politics complicate heritage practices. Once we started collecting information for the exhibit and outreach components of our project, we spent time in evening team meetings debriefing, workshopping products, and discussing how and why we would explore meanings of and engagements with heritage among stakeholders. These debriefs were a key component of the mentor-student relationship in the field experience.⁴⁴ They helped our team recognize the need for ongoing reflections about how our disciplinary lenses of experience influenced our philosophies about community work, goals and expectations, and the ways we conduct the creative process.

Early in our field experience, the graduate students were somewhat guarded about the disciplines that framed their intellectual lenses of experience and struggled with critiques of history and public history concerning the power dynamics tied to the construction of historical knowledge. But as we connected with a broader range of stakeholders and heritage practitioners, they embraced intellectual reflexivity and acknowledged the limitations and benefits to multiple disciplines that study the past. In Lisa's notes, she made comparisons with other international programs she had been involved in and posed valuable questions about interdisciplinarity in international public history work, noting, "Exactly how many public historians are involved in projects across the globe or are in each country in general? In both Belize and Istanbul, it seems like anthropologists and archeologists are involved in public or community-based projects . . . [but] Where are the historians on these projects? How would a historian's approach be different or the same? Much to think about."⁴⁵

Cultural Immersion

Through the intimate and immersive cultural experience that a field-based model allows, the university students fostered relationships with individuals,

42 For example, David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

43 For example, Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.

44 Tim Wallace and Madelyn Iris emphasize the significance of the mentor-student relationship in an apprenticeship approach to training university students. Wallace and Iris, "Mentorship and the Field School Experience," *NAPA Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2004): 142–46.

45 Withers, field notes, June 12, 2016.

communities, and institutions. The students recognized the need for long-term research and for establishing rapport within public history scholarship, and they developed sophisticated knowledge of the connections two Belizean communities have with cultural heritage.⁴⁶ On the value of the cultural immersion aspects of our program, Lisa wrote, “Working in Crooked Tree provided me a deeply engaging community and cross-cultural experience” and “the opportunity to genuinely connect with a community . . . to spend a significant amount of time getting to know the families in the village, to learn about and participate in activities in the community, and to spend time talking with residents to understand what they consider to be important about their home.”⁴⁷ Hannah referred to the responsibilities she felt to appropriately represent “the community that we’ve grown to know” and highlighted her understandings of the complex nature of heritage. She noted, “We are working on finalizing what we will highlight when it comes to community history [in the exhibit]. We’ve spent so much of the time we’ve been here talking to people, getting to know them, and learning about the history and culture in Crooked Tree, that we’re excited (and nervous) about capturing the complexities and richness of the community in just a few exhibit panels.”⁴⁸

Hannah’s work with schools demonstrates the significance of developing relationships with youth and teachers and considering them as integral stakeholders in public history projects. Hannah told me that her exchanges with the primary school and undergraduate students were particularly meaningful, and in her notes she talked about the things she learned from the Belizean students. Hannah also learned about the needs and concerns of teachers. After a conversation with a teacher toward the end of our time in Belize, she said, “Teacher George talked about how he thinks history isn’t taught well because ‘you have to know where you come from’ and people don’t learn that history. I cried while he was talking about this, because . . . that feeling is so true and so frustrating and it’s hard to understand the gravity and importance of it unless you literally don’t have access to it. And he seemed sad and I felt sad.”⁴⁹

The process of developing community relationships is essential for understanding the complexities of cultural heritage initiatives. In our project, students saw firsthand that a “community” is not a monolithic entity.⁵⁰ Exposure to multiple

46 Madelyn Iris discusses similar results in a service learning–focused ethnographic field school. Iris, “Fulfilling Community Needs through Research and Service: The Northwestern University Ethnographic Field School,” *NAPA Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2004): 55–71.

47 Withers, BAAS presentation.

48 Scruggs, field notes, June 13, 2016.

49 Scruggs, field notes, June 20, 2016.

50 See Leon Fink, “When Community Comes to Roost: The Southern Milltown as Lost Cause,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 119–45; and K. Anne Pyburn, “Engaged Archaeology: Whose Community? Which Public?,” in *New Perspectives in Global Public Archaeology*, ed. Akira Matsuda and Katsuyuki Okamura (New York: Springer, 2011): 29–41. Berman, “Lessons from the Navajo” discusses how students learn to navigate local politics and understand power relations and intersections between different institutions.

points of view through field experiences is useful for teaching students how best to incorporate diversity into interpretative and educational materials (e.g., by acknowledging that all perspectives about the past may not be appropriate, and by producing materials in a variety of formats for a range of populations). In her notes from after we visited the community-based museum project in Seine Bight, Lisa compared the situations in Crooked Tree and Seine Bight and reflected on the sustainability of community-based projects. She said, “It’s awesome to see a museum being built in Seine Bight . . . this project makes me wonder how sustainability differs between Crooked Tree and Seine Bight with cultural heritage projects and why? . . . Sometimes it’s just really hard to get such projects up and going. Not only are communities different from each other, they are different within themselves. It may not be possible to really identify what will or will not make a community-based project successful because of the number of variables involved.”⁵¹

Student learning about community diversity and the complexities of community engagement translated into the field experience in several ways. In our home visits and interviews, the students tried to capture varied perspectives about land management, the usage of environmental resources, conservation, and tourism. In conversations with the BAS, staff talked about their mission to protect local environmental resources and mentioned the historically contentious relationship between BAS and Crooked Tree. The staff explained that many residents feel the community did not get to take part in decisions to designate the space a protected area. Several villagers expressed frustration with BAS to us, and one elder, Miss Verna Adolphus, said, “Audubon [is] responsible for changing the lifestyle of Crooked Tree; before, people could fish, hunt, and harvest and support themselves.” Lisa balanced these different perspectives by incorporating panels into the exhibit about the history of the BAS and its environmental conservation and education efforts, but also highlighted the ways Kriol people have been utilizing local environmental resources for generations. Balancing these positions, we included text on an exhibit panel that read: “As times change, BAS and Crooked Tree Villagers work to find new ways to collaborate.” Such collaboration was exemplified by the fact that one of the biggest community critics of the BAS voluntarily offered his personal map of the wetlands for us to hang up at the BAS office during our project open house.

Lisa was also able to balance the fact that members of the same community had quite different ideas about the content for a local heritage exhibit by developing a range of panels. One elder, Miss Ava Gillett, emphasized to us the significance of village history and the need for “children to learn their roots.” She told us about a variety of food practices that used to be part of daily life (e.g., rice processing and cohune oil making), and these were included in the exhibit. The village chairman, Mr. Darrell Tillet, wanted the exhibit to focus on things that made Crooked

⁵¹ Withers, field notes, June 12, 2016.

Crooked Tree Then & Now: Daily Life

Daily life in Crooked Tree changed over time
as new technologies became available.

Community elders remember when families rarely went to the store because they collected or made everything needed for daily life at home. The following are aspects of village life as shared by community elders:

- Went to the lagoon or the well and “backed water” (carried back) for household chores.
- Boiled clothes, used hard soap, and used a washboard to clean clothes.
- Used fire hearth and pestle with mortar in food preparation. Fire hearth is still considered the best method for cooking many local dishes.
- Boiled cohune palm nuts in chicle pots to make cohune oil for cooking. A few people still process cohune in addition to coconut oil.
- Ground and processed sugar cane for juice and syrup.

Left to Right: Sugar cane grinder and cooking on a fire hearth.

These aspects of daily life changed as access to the city and running water increased. New technologies such as washing machines and stoves also changed daily life in the village.

Exhibit panel about changes in daily life over time. (Panel courtesy of Alicia McGill, written by Lisa Withers)

Tree unique, marketable, and could increase visibility to tourists. Business owners who were surveyed by the undergraduate students expressed concern about tourism and sustainability. To address the chairman’s and business owners’ interests, Lisa asked UNH student Katherine Pendleton to design a panel on the many cultural and ecological attractions in the village and a panel highlighting the local businesses.

The students learned a great deal about the nature of community engagement in the field experience. They found that projects do not always work in the ways that one anticipates. For example, people are not always direct in expressing their thoughts, whether about local history or a public exhibit, so the students learned

to be creative in the questions they posed, asking for peoples' perspectives about tourism, youth, and the future of the community to gather interests in local history. Additionally, Lisa clearly learned about differing ways of thinking about community engagement and what constitutes a community from our interactions with various stakeholders. In Lisa's notes about the BAAS meeting of scholars interested in community-based heritage work, she stated, "Should there be revisions to what it means to have an engaged community? I think it's good to periodically revisit and ask how do we know if a community is engaged or not—how do we define this? What counts? As communities change, shouldn't also the definition for a community-engaged project?"⁵²

Meta-Cognition, Racial Politics, and Intersectionality through Cultural Exchange

Cultural exchanges in the field experience helped the university students understand Belizean culture. But another important pedagogical aspect of the field experience was that it provided them with meta-cognitive opportunities through which to learn about themselves. Student field notes and our conversations during and after the field experience revealed that their interactions with Belizeans increased their awareness of their own experiences, thought processes, and how they are situated culturally and academically in the world. In a note written after we returned to the states, Lisa said, "Spending six weeks in Belize provided an opportunity for professional and intellectual growth, the opportunity to experience different cultures and cultural activities . . . and challenged me to grow as a person."⁵³

During the field experience, Lisa and Hannah identified several "aha" moments when they realized something about themselves or what they were observing, including moments of culture shock and ways they adapted to new experiences and environments. They noted instances of homesickness, similarities between the rural southern US communities in which they were raised and the pastoral environment of Crooked Tree, curiosity and surprise about foods and food practices, and pleasure and pride when they suddenly understood a Kriol word or joke. Hannah provided a specific example of a revelation in her first field note entry. She said, "So far, my experience in Belize (all ten hours of it) has me thinking a lot about diasporas and what it means to be located in this particular spot in the Caribbean/Atlantic world. People live in Belize (and visit Belize) from all over the world. I don't know why this is surprising to me. This is my first time in Central America."⁵⁴

It is important for historians and anthropologists alike to consider how racial, ethnic, economic, and political history and contemporary cultural politics influence usages of "the past" in the present. To this end, Lisa, Hannah, and I spent

⁵² Withers, field notes, June 29, 2016

⁵³ Withers, personal note, July 2016.

⁵⁴ Scruggs, field notes, May 18, 2016.

a lot of time talking about the race/color/ethnicity/class matrix in Belize.⁵⁵ As international fieldwork and cultural exchanges increase in public history, I am increasingly aware of the importance of considering how the positionality and subjectivity of public history practitioners influence interpretations, experiences, and scholarship. As a white, American female working in a Belizean African-descendant community, I think about this a lot. Working with university students in the Belize field experience compelled me to think about positionality and subjectivity in new ways.

Lisa and Hannah are both African American women, and during the field experience they often discussed how their experiences in Belize inspired them to think about their backgrounds and cultural experiences. They were struck by the significant population of people of African descent in Belize and their feelings of affinity toward the Kriol people in Crooked Tree and Biscayne. Hannah said, “it’s interesting to be in a place where many people look like you,”⁵⁶ and Lisa commented, “When I first arrived in Belize, I was amazed to find myself in a society where so many people looked like me. For once, I look like a member of the majority of people in a place outside of a family function or church.”⁵⁷

Hannah’s and Lisa’s cultural and intellectual backgrounds influenced how they engaged as individuals and historians in the field experience. They were curious about constructions of race in Belize and engaged in many conversations about racial issues with Belizeans. Their conversations and questions enriched and informed our experiences. Hannah and Lisa posed questions that as a white person I have at times felt uncomfortable asking, and Belizeans brought up race more frequently in conversation during the field experience than in my previous research. The ways many Belizeans freely talked about phenotypical characteristics was striking to Hannah and Lisa. We were told many times that Hannah and Lisa look Belizean because of their phenotypic characteristics associated with a mixed African and European descent. Hannah commented, “I’m told by most everyone I’ve met that I look like a ‘Crooked Tree Girl,’ meaning I am a certain skin tone with a certain hair texture.”⁵⁸

As Hannah and Lisa considered their own identities, they also made connections with racial issues within the broader context of Belizean history and culture. Commentary about other groups of people helped them learn about how Belizeans categorize themselves and others. Hannah and Lisa both mentioned in their notes conversations with Belizeans about tensions related to Guatemalans and immigration and discussions about race and ethnicity in Belize and the United States. After interactions with a Garifuna community, Lisa posed thoughtful questions such as,

55 Melissa Johnson uses the term race/color/class matrix to discuss cultural dynamics in Belize. I added ethnicity to this concept. Johnson, “Nature and Progress in Rural Creole Belize,” 55–56.

56 Scruggs, field notes, May 18, 2016.

57 Withers, field notes, June 14, 2016.

58 Scruggs, field notes, May 26, 2016.

“How do the different ethnic groups in Belize interact with each other? Long time tensions? New conflicts?”⁵⁹

Although Lisa and Hannah made many comparisons between Belize and “things back home,” they also applied cultural relativism and historical thinking to ask questions about how and why things were different, especially in relation to aspects of race, ethnicity, and class. As a project team, we discussed limitations in observations and the importance of being reflexive about racial connections to ensure that presumed shared experiences, similarities, and values do not obscure other strong cultural differences. For example, Lisa and Hannah mentioned several times that they found the rural, bucolic environment of Crooked Tree familiar because it reminded them of rural southern US communities. Lisa said, “I more or less feel at home at Crooked Tree, even with the cultural and language differences, because of the variety of skin tones represented within the village and in being in a rural area. In many ways it reminds me of my family and where I grew up.”⁶⁰ Because of this familiarity, the students assumed the cultural experiences of Belizean Kriols and African Americans might be quite similar. We talked about the need to be cautious about those assumptions.

The cross-cultural exchanges we participated in throughout the field experience provided us with many opportunities to talk about colorism and racial and cultural politics in Belize, and to think about how racial and cultural dynamics might influence public history projects. Our conversations about race translated into the field experience in several ways. Hannah was particularly interested in talking about race, ethnicity, and global experiences of blackness very early on with Belizeans. We discussed the importance of developing rapport with people before asking complicated questions about identity. Hannah waited to have conversations with people in Crooked Tree until we had been there for a couple weeks. With the primary school students, she also tried to connect through discussion about popular culture topics and peoples, rather than explicitly talking about race. Where it was more appropriate, she engaged in heavier conversations about the impacts of racial history and politics on interpretations of cultural heritage with heritage professionals at the Museum of Belize, Belize Archives and Records Service, and Institute for Social and Cultural Research.

Our conversations about race translated into our project materials. In the exhibit panels focused on the early history and industries in Crooked Tree, we chose not to feature the local history of slavery. Slavery did not come up in our engagements with community members. And, as our project was the first exhibit of its kind in Crooked Tree, we decided to tread lightly with content about race and ethnicity. Our team discussed possibilities for future exhibit themes that could address more complicated historical topics, such as exhibits on the earliest settlements in the

⁵⁹ Withers, field notes, June 14, 2016.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

region, the development and cultural impacts of the earliest industries, and/or unpacking genealogies of local people in exhibit materials.

The field experience inspired me to think more deeply about my own subjectivity and positionality. And the discussions Hannah, Lisa, and I had about Belizean concepts of race, gender, ethnicity, and class reinforced the value of intercultural and culturally relevant pedagogy⁶¹ and helped me think more about the complexities and problems with bounded and simplified social categories in similar veins as intersectionality theorists.⁶² Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the term intersectionality to bring attention specifically to the “multidimensionality” and fluid identities of marginalized peoples, to highlight complex and intersecting power hierarchies and forms of discrimination related to race, gender, and class in society, and to examine the intersections of race, gender, and class in the experiences of women of color.⁶³ The conversations Lisa, Hannah, and I had about their experiences in the United States and in Belize and about young women in Belize reinforced the ways in which black women are “multiply marginalized” and highlighted the value of bringing these voices to the table. Hannah’s and Lisa’s insights into Kriol heritage enabled me to see the experiences of Kriol people, history, and culture with new perspectives.

Using intersectionality as a theoretical lens has the potential to make significant contributions to community-based scholarship and to public history and heritage studies pedagogy and research by increasing multivocality and addressing complexities of identity and power dynamics.⁶⁴ The public history field experience in Belize revealed several ways intersectionality could be incorporated into community-based heritage initiatives: (1) by scholars making concerted efforts to provide research opportunities to students with diverse backgrounds; (2) by incorporating intersectionality theories and practices into the ways heritage is studied and engaging with “multiply marginalized” peoples as research subjects in heritage and public history scholarship; and (3) by providing opportunities for cross-cultural and international exchange in scholarship, community engagement, and educational training.

61 Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Education Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1997): 465–91.

62 Leslie McCall describes intersectionality as a category of analysis that examines “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations.” McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 1771.

63 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67. See also Jennifer C. Nash, “Re-thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89 (2008): 1–15.

64 Antoinette T. Jackson’s book, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* (Walnut Creek, MD: Left Coast Press, 2012), is a good model for ways heritage scholars can explore multidimensional intersections of social processes such as race and gender. Jackson, an African American woman, provides interpretations of the lives of enslaved peoples that complicate traditional, essentialized narratives of the history of slavery. She incorporates discussion about the significance of Michelle Obama’s heritage and connects with contemporary racial politics and practices of cultural heritage interpretation, management, tourism, and preservation.

Integrating the Field Experience Model into Public History

Although our project provides a positive case study for international public history field experiences, it was not without limitations and challenges. A short timeline (six weeks) meant limited time for advanced language training, developing exhibit text, and other important tasks such as assessing project products. Additionally, in a time of increasing budget cuts for social sciences and humanities initiatives, acquiring funding for community-based heritage field experiences can be difficult. However, with creative thinking about university resources, combining multiple sources, and integrating community engagement projects with one's research, it is possible to support field experiences. Universities often have small grants available for student research, study abroad, and diversity initiatives. Ellie, our partner from UNH, and I sought these kinds of funds from multiple sources. I utilized my departmental travel funds and a Faculty Research and Development Grant from NC State for our program. And Ellie was awarded grants from UNH to support our project including a Publicly Engaged Humanities Fellowship and an Emeriti Council Student International Service Initiative Grant.

Despite the challenges to developing these kinds of projects, I argue the field school model is a productive fit for US and international public history work. In the remaining sections of this paper, I suggest research practices that would assist the process of applying the field experience model to public history.

Public history scholars interested in the field experience model should think about ways to integrate undergraduate and graduate student research projects and internships into their research agendas. And as they apply for funding, they should seek grants that also support student work and community engagement. It is not uncommon for public history faculty to incorporate service learning and community engagement⁶⁵ into their courses; to implement a field experience approach, they could consider developing summer programs that would have more extensive, culturally immersive components. In anthropology, field experiences are often linked with long-term projects (e.g., the CHAP).⁶⁶ The development of long-term initiatives by public history scholars would assist them in the implementation of field experiences. In particular, spending a significant amount of time on related projects in the same communities would be helpful in organizing the logistics for student involvement and developing partnerships that are essential to the success of field experiences.

65 Burg, "From Troubled Ground to Common Ground," 51–82; Erin Conlin, "Organizing and Executing Meaningful and Manageable Community-Based Oral History Projects," *The Public Historian* 8, no. 3 (August 2016): 50–77.

66 Another example is the ethnographic field school Tim Wallace has conducted in Central America for twenty-four years. See Tim Wallace, "North Carolina State University 24th Annual Ethnographic Field School," <https://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/wallace/Guatemala%20index.htm>; and Daniela Natale Diamante and Tim Wallace, "Ethnographic Field Schools, Community Service Learning, and the Homestay Experience," *NAPA Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2004): 147–58.

Public history could also draw from the structural aspects of field experiences. As I demonstrated with the Belize field experience, the meta-cognitive components of the project were significant for the students. Journals are already common in public history internships; reinforcing the importance of journals and field notes and drawing from them in public history field experiences would be worthwhile for assessing student learning and deriving new insights into community connections with history. Finally, public historians interested in field experiences that train students in community-based heritage work should cultivate internships in diverse communities and develop partnerships with institutions that work with communities.

Successful integration of the field experience model in the disciplines of public history and heritage studies would also require changes to the cultures of these disciplines. Such changes include increased interdisciplinarity, additional recognition of the values of international programing, acknowledgement of the ways active student learning enhances scholarship, and an understanding that in public history and heritage work, process is an important product and one that can be examined as a scholarly endeavor.

Additionally, long-term community-based field projects would be more frequent and successful with recurrent financial resources from universities and recognition of the scholarly significance of such projects when evaluating faculty teaching and research and making leave, promotion, and tenure decisions. Currently, there exist initiatives to implement curricular and structural changes to public history and anthropology to make public engagement more feasible in the academy.⁶⁷ Such movements to increase interdisciplinarity, support opportunities for international and cross-cultural exchanges, and bring attention to the values of community-based scholarship will benefit student training, history and anthropology research, and community engagement.

Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrated the pedagogical and scholarly benefits of an international community-based public history field experience that involved a diverse range of stakeholders and integrated public history, anthropology, and heritage studies theories and methodology. The intercultural and interdisciplinary structure of the field experience discussed in this article enabled rich cultural and intellectual exchanges between Belizeans and Americans and across disciplines. The community-based focus and immersive nature of the field experience were integral

67 Filene, "Passionate Histories," 32; Setha M. Low and Sally Engle Merry, "Engaged Anthropology: Diversity and Dilemmas: An Introduction to Supplement 2," *Current Anthropology* 51, supplement 2 (October 2010): S203–S226; National Council on Public History, Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association, "Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Historian," 2010, <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Engaged-Historian-White-Paper-FINAL.pdf>.

to students' developing understandings of the complex nature of heritage, the importance of process in research and engagement, and the value of institutional and community partnerships. In addition to the academic benefits, initiatives such as the field experience can also strengthen community engagement efforts and make significant contributions to the humanities.

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