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Who was cleared? Chucalissa museum, a land-clearing project

Abstract

Within Memphis' T.O. Fuller State Park, formerly the Shelby County Negro State Park, lies the C.H. Nash Chucalissa Museum where skeletal remains of the Tunica people are on display. Because it is a popular tourist attraction and a hub for archeology research, it has been dubbed the "central clearing house for Western Tennessee archeology." Despite the many journal articles written about Chucalissa, underwhelmingly few critically engage with the Black labor exploited and the sacred burial mounds disturbed in the "clearing" and excavating of this exhibit. In this paper, I exchange the definition of "clearing," a technical term common among archeologists with one that exposes it as a euphemism that disavows the historic violence of extraction.[1,2] Through an interdisciplinary textual analysis of Nash's "Chucalissa Indian Town," this paper inquires what does it really mean for Chucalissa to be a "land clearing project" and a "central clearing house"? Who was cleared? How will digging up the history of the Chucalissa Museum shape our interpretations of regional archeology at that time? Finally, how can these findings contribute to the present Black and Native tensions with Chucalissa and to the broader conversations on repatriation?

Keywords: Chucalissa, CH Nash, clearing, repatriation, settler colony, excavation, archeology

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Abbreviation: NIYC, National Indian Youth Council

Introduction

The term "Chucalissa" loosely translates to "the abandoned" in Choctaw to represent the Tunica Natives or the *First Mississippians*' unexplained migratory patterns in and out of the village.[3] Because of archeologists' contribution to the Chucalissa Museum, since 1956, Tunican belongings and their civilization recreated through statues for display are fixed features within the museum. Located within Memphis' T.O. Fuller Park is the nationally landmarked C.H. Nash Chucalissa Museum, a 187 square mile exhibition that produced a recreation of indigenous living, displayed human remains and village relics, and functioned earthen mounds as a lab for archeologists. Its growing popularity as a playground for archeologists overshadows the tensions Chucalissa represents for local Natives who demand repatriation and local Black people who speak on the deplorable housing conditions. This uneven tilt is also seen within archeological discourse on the making of Chucalissa. Through a critique of Chucalissa archeology, this paper intends to refocus conversations found on Chucalissa toward the bodies used to clear, excavate, and to make way for the museum. Since the reconstructed Native village at Chucalissa is regional archeology's interpretation of the past, how will digging up the history of the Chucalissa Museum shape our interpretations of regional archeology at that time? What context will it bring to the Black and Native tensions with Chucalissa and the broader conversations on repatriation?

The C.H. Nash Chucalissa museum's opening in 1956 attracted tourists worldwide and ushered a new wave of young scholars toward a career in archeology. By 1974, the museum received national recognition as a historic landmark, and T.O. Fuller Park became the 4th most popular Tennessee State Park.[4] Because Chucalissa's primary function and focus was educational; "six to ten thousand students from kindergarten to college took the grand tour annually," and the museum held archeological field trips each summer to inform them about how indigenous people lived in the Mid-South before colonization (104). Memphis State University and the University of Memphis especially benefitted from Chucalissa because these universities leveraged Chucalissa's archeological appeal to attract faculty and students to the anthropology department. Furthermore, their private access to bones and "prehistory" objects remains a valuable resource for students developing their final thesis projects and for faculty publications. The success seen by state institutions, the tourist industry, and educational institutions designated Chucalissa as the "central clearing house for Western Tennessee archeology".[5] This success, however, has not been seen as intensely by the Black and Native people surrounding this park despite both being essential behind the making of Chucalissa.

Before this park gained the name T.O. Fuller, after the educator, pastor, politician, and activist for Black rights Dr. Thomas O. Fuller, it was originally the Shelby County Negro State Park. This park was one of the first segregated parks east of the Mississippi where Black children were allowed to play and was one of the many physical reminders of Shelby County's legacy of slavery and the Jim Crow segregation that zoned Black populations in and around this park. When the support for expanding excavation efforts for Chucalissa grew between 1938-1952, the area for a safe space for Black people shrunk. During this time, the Black people allowed on this redesignated site were the inmates that state-sponsored archeologists used for digs.

Since before the Chucalissa Museum opened in the late '50s, Black and Native organizing groups aligned in addressing the deplorable living conditions on the reservation. Despite the general demands for better housing conditions from the city government from Black power movement and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) organizers since the 60s,[6,7] today the huts used to display indigenous living remain in better repair than the many homes of nearby residents. The multi-scalar support present for Chucalissa but absent for Black and Natives represents a preference for the speculation of the pre-historic Native over addressing the stated needs of Black residents and Native nations. This lack of critical engagement with Black and Native concerns is also found among archeologists who study Chucalissa.

Most of the journal article publications on Chucalissa come from the anthropology and archeology fields with authors like Gates

& Nash[5] and McNutt, Franklin, & Henry[8] as important research contributors on this site. Charles Nash (1962) was the lead supervisor during this 30-year excavation project and whom the C.H. Nash Chucalissa Museum was named after. In 1962, when the Memphis State University assumed administrative responsibility of Chucalissa, Memphis State saw a steady rise in the anthropology Master, PhD, and faculty publications on Chucalissa's "prehistoric" relics.[4] Yet under whelmingly few critically engage with the Black labor exploited and the sacred burial mounds disturbed in the "clearing" and excavating of this exhibit. Thus, this paper applies the language and methods of anti-settler colonial scholarship to archeology articles on Chucalissa, specifically Nash's article "Chucalissa Indian Town." The aim is to analyze the exploitation significant to the history of Chucalissa and the ways that harm has been reproduced by archeologists through their language use in article writings.

Methodology

This paper examines the historical background of how Chucalissa became an archeological site and highlights the kinds of exploitation those archeologists relied on to make those digs possible. I make different types of exploitation my focal point so that it becomes another frame with which to view Chucalissa. Through this vantage point, I can explore how this history of exploitation impact how we think of Chucalissa Museum specifically and the problems of archeology more generally. I evaluate preferred parts of speech standard among archeologists as evidence of the enduring connection between archeology and settler colonial practices for expansion. Specifically, I analyze the phrase "clearing" found in the article "Chucalissa Indian Town" and use the contributions of anti-colonial scholars to illustrate how the term is a historic euphemism that disavowed the violence of extraction. Although Chucalissa is a hub for archeology research, exploring the nuances of Chucalissa Museum's history of exploitation demands an analytical framework that pulls from across disciplines.

Analysis

For some archeologists, Chucalissa was understood as a "land-clearing" project.[5,8] Clearing described the process of moving unwanted or obstructed items above the land out of the way. In property law, clearing refers to the discard of crops and trees to make way for private services or public access. For example, McNutt[8] described the Black members of the Civilian Conservation Corps who uncovered human remains in an outlying section of the town as conducting a "land-clearing operation" in preparation for a swimming pool (232). In these scenarios, land-clearing meant the removal of crops and trees, but Tiffany Lethabo King in their critique of settler colonial studies within *The Black Shoals*[1] warns of how the clearing as a preferred parts of speech disavow the genocidal nature of the formation of the United States (67). Within a settler colony, the objects obstructing accumulation of lands were Native bodies.

In Frank Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*,[2] "clearing" was a metonym for a "place-name" like a settler town safe from Native attack. But for illegally occupied lands to be "settled," conquistadors cleared Natives from the lands:

"*Clearing* in the Settler / 'Savage' relation, has two grammatical structures, one as a noun and the other as a verb. But the Western only recognizes *clearing* as a noun…. [clearing] labored not across the land as a noun but as a verb on the body of the 'Savage,' speaking civil society's essential status as an effect for genocide" (207; 213).

As a noun "clearing" eschews its genocidal roots, but clearing as a verb acknowledges these roots because it reattaches the conquistador (the agent) to the genocide performed on the Native body (the object). Following the etymology or the study of words' meaning and how they change over time elucidates the ways words themselves can enact violence through obfuscation.

Refining the term "clearing" to include the ways settler colonialism clears the native body in order to pull from the land means that archeology must contend with the violence of excavation. In this case, what does it now mean for Chucalissa to be a "land-clearing" project and a "central clearing house"? Who was cleared? For one, once the former playground became an excavation site, most of the Black bodies within this zone were inmates reduced to labor. This is evidenced within "Chucalissa Indian Village" article and the callous language used to describe the predominately Black inmates. As the supervisor C.H. Nash reflected, "Shelby County Commissioner Rudolph Jones supported the plan [to dig] and made Penal Farm labor available for the huge task of clearing the site, excavating, and rebuilding".[5] The Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society both trained and supervised these primarily Black prison laborers. Nash's summary of inmate relations to the labor and the archeologist overseers were as follows:

"Many, naturally, were short-termers who did not stay long enough to get the proper knack of lifting dirt from a six-centuries-old burial without disturbing the fragile, chalky bones, and some were terror-stricken at the thought of just being near human remains, let alone handling them; but a few long termers and repeats (the habitual drunks, who spend more time in jail than out) took to their jobs with relish and great enthusiasm" (105).

According to this metric of labor extraction, the inmates' technical skills and their "stomach" for excavating graves determined their labor value. The words "many," "few," "short-termers," and "long-termers" indicated that archeologists depended on prison labor but often discarded and resupplied the prisoners. These bodies supplied by the Shelby County Commissioner symbolizes the degrees of support archeologists to excavate Chucalissa and this support equipped them with the right to be the wards of the inmate excavators. The bodies rendered fungible in the making of Chucalissa alludes to the leading anthropologists' comfortability with Black discomfort, forced labor, and Native death evidences the ways in which governance practices from settler colonies looms over archeology. The clearing is a useful analytic because it redirects us to consider who was cleared in the making of Chucalissa. Chucalissa was the redesignation of burials sites or play areas as excavation zones. In the making of a clearing house that catapulted mid-south archeology, its popularity has casted over conversations led by marginalized groups. Because of this dynamic, this paper's conclusion will reverberate the importance of Native discourse on repatriation.

Conclusion

Chucalissa as a museum, exhibition, and a nationally recognized heritage landmark both preserves and showcases a version of the past, but these storytellers disavow the violence of disrupting burial grounds and use of inmate labor to do so. It is these patterns of violence that motivated anthropologists from 67 different Native American tribes to meet at the American Indian Chicago Conference in 1961, one year prior to Memphis State University assuming administrative responsibility over Chucalissa. The point of conversation was to discuss how urgent it was to remove the academic expert so that Native community members could identify and create solutions to their issues themselves. The product of this conference was the Declaration of Indian purpose, which emphasized the "right to choose our own way of life" and the "responsibility of preserving

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our precious heritage".[9] Growing discussions like these contributed to the 1990 Native American Graves and Repatriation Act and its grounding principle that native human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and cultural patrimony be treated with "at all times dignity and respect" otherwise it should be returned to its descendants. From these vantage points, Chucalissa's history exploitation of inmate labor to disturb funeral sites for public exhibition and research is a transgression of the dignity and respect perquisite.[10–13]

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Conflicts of Interest

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