

History in Focus
**S2 E7 Indigenous Art and History +
Conversations with the Dead**

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Daniel Story

Welcome to *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. This is episode seven of season two, it's March 2024, and today, we have two segments that feature pieces in this month's AHR issue. In part two, we revisit historian Edward Muir's presidential address at this year's AHA annual meeting in San Francisco. It's titled "Conversations with the Dead". But first, producer Matt Hermane sits down with University of Minnesota historian Brenda Child, to discuss the latest entry in AHR's "Art and Historical Methods" series, which in the March issue focuses on contemporary Indigenous art and history. I'm Daniel Story. Thank you for joining us. And now let's pass it to Matt.

Matt Hermane

At the 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition of international art, indigenous Sámi artists represented Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

Katya García-Antón in OCA video on the Sámi Pavilion

This is a historic moment. It's the first time that Sámi artists are present in the Nordic Pavilion. In 2022, the Nordic Pavilion will transform into the Sámi Pavilion.

Matt Hermane

The exhibition's Sámi Pavilion provides the inspiration for the March issue of the AHR's History Lab on Indigenous art and history. I spoke with Professor Brenda Child of the Red Lake Ojibwe of northern Minnesota, and Northrop Professor of American Studies and American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota, who writes the introduction for the History Lab and contributes an essay of her own. Her piece is accompanied by Dr. Matthew Martinez's interview with Pueblo artist Virgil Ortiz and Dr. Patricia Norby's essay on Georgia O'Keeffe's New Mexican paintings. Respectively, they explore artists' efforts to challenge policies that are detrimental to both Indigenous lifestyles and the environment, discuss the preservation of Indigenous history through a variety of artistic mediums, and encourage critique of artwork that employs Indigenous histories and motifs. My interview with Dr. Child features the music of Red Lake Ojibwe singer Joe Rainey and the Sámi duo Wimme & Rinne.

Matt Hermane

While I definitely want to talk about your experience in Norway. But before we get to that, I kinda want to talk about the introduction that you wrote. You open it with this quote from Oscar Howe and you conclude the introduction by mentioning Howe again, and also George Morrison, who are both American Indian painters who were uncomfortable with how the art world defined their work. So how was that the art world to find their work? And how was that problematic in the eyes of artists like Howe and Morrison?

Brenda Child

Right, it's interesting that you asked this because I was just talking with my undergrads about both of them this morning. And I was mentioning the fact that Oscar Howe, the great Dakota modernist painter, was rejected from an art show at the Philbrook Institute. This was kind of famous story and American Indian art history. He was very influenced, as people were in mid-century, by Cubism, and he was experimenting and doing all sorts of interesting things with his work. And the art show rejected him saying his work was not Indian enough for them. And he was really deeply offended by that. I know from talking to George Morrison's family, here in Minnesota, he is another, you know, very well-known 20th-century American artist who was very influential in the development of abstract expressionism, who felt very offended that people were trying to narrowly define him and his work. And he always liked to call himself not an Indian artist, but rather an artist who was an American Indian. So both of them, I think, as well as probably other artists at mid-century, were having a difficult time because people wanted to put them into certain boxes and categories, and both of them chafed under that restriction.

Matt Hermane

Just thinking about the History Lab piece broadly, if you were to sum up the point you're trying to get across with the three essays, what would you say that is?

Brenda Child

I think our goal was very much to talk about Indigenous artists who were trying to communicate and think about ideas of history in their work. I think American Indians and Indigenous people, just by the nature of our political circumstances are always is having to engage with history. You know, I know Matt Martinez has a nice interview with the Pueblo ceramicist Virgil Ortiz in the journal. And one of the things that Mr. Ortiz mentioned is that he's always trying to talk about the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 in his ceramic work. And I thought, well, that's really interesting, because sometimes if you go look at Pueblo ceramics in a museum, you may not think they're talking about history, right? But he definitely sees his work as moving

in that direction. I mean, my piece about the Sámi artists in the Venice Biennale, I thought that was a very big deal that these Indigenous artists were chosen to represent the Scandinavian countries, the Nordic countries in the Biennale in 2022. Especially because of the fact that in many ways, the Sámi people in Scandinavia are having a difficult time with the government. So Norway, and Sweden, and Finland who are, are kind of working in many ways to reduce their reindeer herding activities. And in some ways, I think I identify with their struggles because it's similar to what many of us as American Indians were going through 100 or 150 years ago.

Matt Hermane

You draw this comparison between the slaughtering of bison in the 19th century and then what's going on in Norway and Sweden today. So can you kind of just like lay out those circumstances a little bit for us?

Brenda Child

Well, I think like so many people, I watched Ken Burns' documentary, *The American Buffalo* this fall. And so I think we need to recognize that that was a huge environmental catastrophe. And it's almost inconceivable to kind of imagine the destruction of 50 million bison. I do think it says something very fundamental about the history of the United States.

Matt Hermane

So the artists in Norway and Sweden that you talk to, what is the challenge that they're facing with the Norwegian government, and I guess by also the Swedish government in too in regards to their lifestyle with reindeer?

Brenda Child

Right. So they're facing challenges, a lot of it has to do with the government's trying to reduce the size of their herds. And they're also facing difficulties relating to climate change. And one of the things I've learned the last few years is that our friends over there who are reindeer herders, have started to kind of supplement the diets of their reindeer, whereas before they used to eat lichen off the trees and off the ground, and now you have these falling and freezing cycles. And so it's difficult for the reindeer to eat the lichen off the ground. So they're spending more money, our friends, and it's not just a money, financial issue, they're worried about the environment—what first time in the history of the world reindeer can not eat the lichen off the ground. So something's happening over there and it's very worrisome to our Sámi colleagues, who are still reindeer herding. And for whatever reason, I love the idea that there are Sámi people in the world who work as reindeer herders and have that lifestyle.

Matt Hermane

And the way they're getting their point across is well in courts, but also through their art, right?

Brenda Child

Through their art. Yeah, especially I think Anders Sunná, who is an artist who works in kind of the Arctic of Sweden, and he paints a lot about the politics of reindeer herding. He comes from a family where generations, they can't even remember when they've been reindeer herders for so long. He's the first generation in his family to not be a reindeer herder because the Swedish government said he couldn't. And then Máret Anne Sara, an artist from Norway. She has a large installation piece in the new National Museum of Norway, that kind of in some ways, followed her brother's court case through the Norwegian courts eventually going to the Norwegian Supreme Court, where he was having the size of his reindeer herds reduced. And she piled up reindeer skulls on the steps of the Norwegian Supreme Court in a very dramatic gesture. But what interested me about that gesture was she said she was thinking of that famous photograph that many of us had in our high school history textbooks that showed the piles of bison skulls from a famous photograph taken in Michigan in 1892. That's one of the images of the United States as a country that has circulated the globe. It wasn't just in our history textbook, it's been all over the world. And so it also sends another message about kind of the environmental history of the United States.

Matt Hermane

Right, absolutely. When you are discussing Anders Sunná, in your essay, you mentioned that his approach to creating his art is kind of like your approach as a historian.

Brenda Child

Well, I was delighted because after we went to the Biennale I felt like I had to go visit Anders. And when I asked him about, his method, he said, well, first I speak to the elders, and only after that, do I go into the library and archives and search out historical documents, and only then do I paint. And I was so struck with his statements, because I thought, well, that's exactly what my process is, as an Indigenous scholar. You know, I talk to elders, I talk to members of our community. And I find that that is essential for me. That's kind of exactly my process, too. So I was sort of struck, and I said, you know, well why do you? Why do you as an artist feel the need to go into libraries and gather paper and work in archives? And he said, I forget what he what his exact words were, but he said, well you're using your evidence against them.

I think for Anders, speaking to the elders was enough, but then you take this extra step of, you know, the evidence is there. So I thought that was really fantastic for a Sámi artist in northern Sweden to be using a process very similar to my own as an American Indian historian.

Matt Hermane

Yeah, I was thinking about this a little bit. I think so often, we associate oral histories and storytelling with Native American Indigenous history. But then I guess, what do you think artists today who are making this kind of art, what are they doing for kind of the historical record? It's kind of like another layer, I think of that history that's not what we often think of as a historian as the archival.

Brenda Child

Well, it's interesting that you say that, because, you know, I'm thinking about somebody like Anders or Sara, and how they are dealing with the circumstances of their lives. Anders talks about how when he paints, he's very angry about the history of how the government and Sweden deals with Sami people, and especially infringing on their rights, which you think would be their Indigenous rights as reindeer herders. And so I think maybe on a day-to-day life, he's trying to express himself, and he often says, that's a productive way to channel my anger. But on the other hand, I think he is telling a story for future generations at the same time, about the history and the politics of reindeer herding, and Sámi lives in the Nordic countries.

Matt Hermane

So for you, how does Indigenous art relate to your own work as a historian?

Brenda Child

I'll just say something that occurred to me, in my teaching, it informs my work and informs my teaching as well. But I'm just teaching an undergrad class this semester, 75 students, and a course on Indians in Minnesota, and we had been talking about the Dakota War of 1862. And also, we read the memoir of Charles Eastman recently, and we're trying to have a discussion in class about those things. And so I was showing my students the work of Oscar Howe, and he has incredible paintings of the Ghost Dance, and also his famous painting of the Wounded Knee Massacre. He had painted that in 1960. So imagine, here he is on the 70th anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre. Now 1960 I don't think we've gone through that whole revision of Indian history in the US—Vine Deloria had not yet written *Custer Died for Your Sins* and even Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* was a 1970 book. So imagine how he must have felt at that time reflecting on history. And so what I realized is, people like that are

doing something similar to what I'm doing. And I find a lot of inspiration. And I think throughout my career, I found inspiration in American Indian artists who are painting about history. Even though I can't be a painter, I do feel a real kinship with them. And I will also say Oscar Howe's painting *The Origin of Corn* was the first painting by an American Indian I have ever seen in an art museum when I was 18 years old. And that made a big impression on me. I had seen traditional artworks, you know, beadwork and baskets and textiles and those sorts of things. But I'd never seen a painting—fine art.

Matt Hermane

I wanted to see if you wanted to say anything about the other two essays. There's Matthew Martinez's interview with Virgil Ortiz, and Virgil Ortiz talks about how he uses traditional techniques and materials to bring Pueblo history not really only into the present, but also like projected into the future as well. And then there's also the really interesting essay by Patricia Norby about Georgia O'Keeffe's skull and bone paintings. And she kind of encourages us to really critique art and artists whose subject matter is related to Indigenous histories.

Brenda Child

When we asked them to contribute to the AHR History Lab section, we really, you know, told them they could do just about anything they wanted. But an interesting thing about both of them is in the last few years, they were both curators, along with other Indigenous people, primarily Pueblo people from the Southwest, in a new exhibit that is now at the Met in New York City that started out in Santa Fe, New Mexico, called *Grounded in Clay*. The idea that was that Indigenous people would be the curators, and they would select the pots and they would write the exhibit labels. I think they're both very proud of that. And Patricia is the first Indigenous curator to be hired by the Met in New York City, and I think she has a lot of really exciting ideas. There's a great story about her in the New York Times at the time she was hired. So it kind of signals I think both of them generationally about some of the changes that we're seeing not just in art and fine art but in how American Indian people are presented and represented in museum exhibitions today

Matt Hermane

I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.

Brenda Child

Okay sure.

Daniel Story

That was producer Matt Hermene in conversation with Brenda Child about the AHR History Lab feature on contemporary Indigenous art and history, which you'll find in the March 2024 issue. Up next we take you into the AHA presidential address delivered by now past president Edward Muir. In the talk titled "Conversations with the Dead" Muir explores the uses and constraints of conversation with individuals from the past as a method of historical research. In what follows you'll hear Ed discuss the piece with AHR editor Mark Bradley, interspersed with selections from the address itself. We begin with Muir's opening remarks.

Edward Muir (AHA Presidential Address)

On December 10, 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli composed what has become the most famous letter from the Italian Renaissance. He was writing to his friend Francesco Vettori, the Florentine ambassador in Rome, from his suburban farm outside Florence, far from the gossip, intrigue, and tussles over policy that had been his food for so long. After the execution of the pseudo-prophet Girolamo Savonarola some fifteen years before, Machiavelli had thrived in the lion's den of Florentine politics as an under-secretary and virtuoso diplomat, but Medici family mediocrities purged him in 1512 in their violent takeover of the Florentine Republic. An ardent republican, Machiavelli was as skeptical of religious fanatics like Savonarola as he was of the self-aggrandizing bankers and parvenue aristocrats like the Medici who sought to rule his city. When his name appeared on a list of anti-Medici conspirators, he was arrested, tortured, and exiled. In the famous letter, he sought to retain the favor of his friend, ever mindful that Vettori had the pull to make it possible for the job-seeking former secretary, "to leave my country home" as he put it, "and say: 'Here I am.'" Until that happened, he was stuck catching thrushes to feed his family, trying to scrape together a living by selling timber from a woodlot and entertaining himself for the afternoon by playing cards in a tavern with an innkeeper, butcher, miller and two bakers, he was caught as he put it, "among these lice" and "my feeling of being ill-treated by Fate."

When evening comes, I return to my home, and I go into my study; and on the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, which are covered with mud and mire, and I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born; and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity (*umanità*), answer me; and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I

no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death: I become completely part of them.

Now Machiavelli alerted his friend to what would become the most elegant, yet failed job application in history, that little book called *The Prince*, he hoped the book would spur “these Medici lords,” as he put it, “. . . to make use of me, even if they start me off by rolling stones.”

In the letter, Machiavelli evoked the Renaissance trope of conversing with the dead ancients, it was the metaphor Francesco Petrarca conjured when he wrote a nasty letter to the Roman orator Cicero, who had been dead for 1,388 years, because Cicero failed to live up to his own advice about political ethics. Embedded in the metaphor of a conversation with the dead, however, is more than an artifact of what would become the public Republic of Letters, which imagined a literary discussion with the classical masters who wrote in Greek and Latin. It implies a fundamental historical method, as Machiavelli wrote: “I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity, answer me.” More than the modern historians’ commonplace that we seek to bring the past back to life for our readers and students, conversations with the dead imagine a give and take—questions from us, answers from them—pursued in an imaginative space, carefully controlled by the documents, until we, as Machiavelli wrote, become completely part of *them*. I want to propose that such an imaginative space begets a certain kind of historical method, that demands we ask the right questions of our dead interlocutors in the hopes of learning the right answers.

Mark Bradley

You say that, you know, in this kind of imaginative space of conversation, that you've got a method, and that that method sees you through thinking about this, can you talk a little in broad brushstrokes about what that method looks like?

Edward Muir

Well, I'm a historian of the Renaissance and one of the things that you find over and over again, in Renaissance writings are conversations with the dead. That is to say, contemporaries in from the 14th century on frequently imagined they were having a conversation with the dead. This starts probably with Dante and meeting Virgil, who's long dead, and they go through a walk through Hell and Purgatory and Heaven and just have a conversation with the people on the other side of the veil. So this is a common trope that you would seek understanding of those have been long gone. And of course, that understanding comes through texts that they had knew about the ancient same as we would now talk about it as documents. That's the entry point I have with these people. So that would be that would be the way to think about it. It was

very common at the time. And I begin my piece about talking about Machiavelli, who had lost his job and it was very much a man of the action in the world. And he talks about how in the evenings after going around trying to make a living, he comes back to his study, he opens his books, he dresses up in what I imagined were the robes he wore when he was an office holder. And for long hours, he says, I sit there and I have a conversation with the ancients and they and their humanity answer me. So that's that's where I start with Machiavelli and his idea that, that his study is a kind of a conversation.

Mark Bradley

Yeah. Do you think Machiavelli shared the same concerns your colleagues did about whether the ancients would understand the questions that he had, do you get a sense of that tension in him?

Edward Muir

Yes. On the one hand, he had a very clear idea that there was this ancient culture who was long distant from him, Cicero, for example, or Livy who he talks a lot about, he knows that they lived in a different time and place, and that not a lot of people knew that at the time, they often didn't have a sense of the gap, he had a clear sense of the gap. But on the other hand, he was deeply involved in practical politics. So many of the questions he wants to ask of the Ancients, which he does, are derived from his own experiences, from people he knew from contemporary events. And so he puts those two things in dialogue. And he doesn't always resolve them. But he tries to resolve them. And I think he's, he's aware that there is this gap. But on the other hand, he's looking for what he might see as guidelines for future behavior, guidelines for from the ink comparing the ancients to the present. For him, he's deeply disappointed in what had gone on in his own lifetime, and in the failure of the politics of his time. So he's looking for guidelines from the past, he sees the difference. But on the other hand, he wants to reform the present on the basis of the past, I think would probably be the best way to think about it.

Edward Muir (AHA Presidential Address)

Now identification is risky. By becoming part of someone else we may achieve some understanding but lose the capacity for judgment, and lose the very advantage of distance that historians have long claimed makes our judgments better than those who came before us, the morning news or the latest political rant. There is also the danger of what might be called the "mirror effect," or seeing oneself in the documents rather than the distant, distinct, different past: mirror, mirror, in my documents, which of my ideas is the fairest of all. As a historian, I have had the ambition to pursue a kind of "dead history," the realm truly of the dead not a reflection of me or my concerns, but that ambition harbors an illusion. The inhabitants of the

historical past are very often reflections in a distorted mirror of the present, a kind of fun-house mirror even of myself. In *Dead Certainties*, Simon Schama faced up to what he said was “the habitually insoluble quandary of the historian: how to live in two worlds at once; how to take the broken, mutilated remains of something or someone from the ‘enemy lines’ of the documented past and restore it to life or give it a decent interment in our own time and place.”

Mark Bradley

You say in the address that you worry a little bit about becoming too identified with the concerns of the dead and talk about the sort of contradictions or tensions of historians living in two worlds at one time. How does that come into the way in which you know you think about the problem?

Edward Muir

That's a very good question. I mean, the problem is, of course, I live in the 21st century. I know what happened over the last 500 years, there's always this tension between my position in history or the historians position in history to put it that way. And the situation of a long time ago. You're always in a kind of tension. On the one hand, the Dead has gone, on the other hand, I want to have a conversation with the dead. They don't know what I think I know just a I am trying to find out something about them. So it's always a tension. It's always this kind of balance. We can always put ourselves in a different place on the scale and the past or the present and but that's the goal. That's the tension.

Edward Muir (AHA Presidential Address)

Despite the dangers of identification or the mirror effect, presiding over a conversation with the dead can be the source of the greatest pleasure in our craft, it is in those occasional moments of enlightenment, even purgation, when I think the dead have answered my questions, and I understand their responses.

Now in this talk, I wanted to restore a bit of life to the past by recounting four kinds of conversations I have had with the dead. These people lived in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries in Italy. The first conversation is with a marginally literate family of Sienese peasants who lived on the borders of the urban Renaissance with its intense emphasis on literacy and writing of all sorts. The second conversation is with a group of thoroughly illiterate peasants who lived in the backwater region of Friuli far from the urban Renaissance of Siena, who have communicated to me through the records of their annual payments in kind to their landlords or more often their failure to pay their contracted rents and through their ritualized violence in moments of insurrection. Their language was one of action, of submission or protest. The third

conversation is with an involuntary nun, Suor Arcangela Tarabotti, who lived in seventeenth-century Venice and who wrote with the intensity of a woman imprisoned by the circumstances of her life. She failed to find very much sympathy or many readers in her lifetime. But in the past few decades, however, her works have been adopted into the feminist canon, and we've heard about her even today. The fourth is with her even more radical contemporary in Venice, Ferrante Pallavicino, a restless friar who became the most popular satirist of his age. He was an ardent critic of the clerical establishment, and perhaps even an unbeliever, who paid the price for offending the powerful religious with his life.

Now my first two conversations with the dead are the most difficult to sustain because these dead souls can barely answer the questions I want to ask, not because they want for Machiavelli's prized humanity but because they lacked full literacy.

Mark Bradley

Your address is organized essentially around four conversations with people who were living in Italy, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, and two of those are with peasant families. And for people who hear the address in San Francisco or read it in the AHR, they'll get a chance to encounter all four of those conversations. But I thought it might be fun here to just drill down on one of them, and particularly the sources that you use to set the conversation in motion. And here I'm thinking of the conversation that you call "with a marginally literate family of Sienese peasants," and I'm also thinking of the parchment-bound farming diaries that inform your conversation with them.

Edward Muir

First off, this is an extraordinary document from the 15th century, we have what we might call a diary, by a probably illiterate peasant, he may have been able to read the diary, but he certainly couldn't write in it. It's a kind of farming diary. So what I imagined happened is he bought this book and every time he had he sold a cow, or, you know, a bushel of wheat, or whatever he would go, he had to go to a notary to register it. And so he would ask somebody, sometimes a notary sometimes other people to write in his diary, what just happened, and sometimes other things crept in, like, you know, a child was sick, or you know, what happened to his wife recently, these things would slip in and out. So he isn't in the modern sense, keeping a diary, his goal is not to talk about himself, or his feelings, or his thinking, it's to keep track of his business transactions, but the other parts we like, creep in. And so this is a very indirect way of getting to something about another human being's experience. And so my goal here obviously, is empathy. And one of the things I tried to do is just figure out, you know, what he was doing financially and, and other ways on a day-to-day basis.

Edward Muir (AHA Presidential Address)

My initial questions have tended toward the mundane details of farm life and the challenges created by the forces external to the farm—those of exploitative lords, pillaging soldiers, and changing labor conditions, such as the transition from serfdom to leasing land or to sharecropping. The medievalist from the University of Siena, Duccio Balestracci, has made my first conversation possible through his transcription and publication of two parchment-bound farming diaries kept by generations of a peasant family who lived in the environs of Siena in central Tuscany in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They could not write themselves but asked others to make notations in the diaries for them. The diaries, in fact, are written in the hands of thirty different people. The most diligent diarist of the family, Benedetto del Massarizia, worked his own fields but rented and share-cropped others, making him both a freeholder and a sharecropper. Now my historical training has led me to take a dim view of sharecropping as an exploitative agricultural system that did not allow peasants to accumulate the rewards of their labor, but in our historical conversation, Benedetto disagreed with me. He was a crafty businessman who entered into sharecropping (what is called in Italian *mezzadria*) contracts for the modest income they produced as a hedge to protect the plots he owned outright from creditors. For Benedetto sharecropping was a kind of income insurance. If rampaging soldiers or bad weather destroyed his crops, he would then owe to a landlord only half of what he could salvage rather than the full loan due to the moneylenders, upon whom he had to rely between planting and harvest for his own freehold. With an elderly mother, five boys and two girls to feed, Benedetto saw advantages to sharecropping, as he put it: “Since I want to support them, it is best for me to remain a sharecropper, for on my own land I cannot support myself.” He also harvested wheat and other grains, made wine, pressed olives, sold wood, pastured pigs, fueled his most lucrative investment, a lime kiln—to use the modern jargon, he diversified his portfolio. He was of course a subaltern whose diary constituted what we might call a weapon of the weak, but this enterprising farmer managed to keep his creditors at bay. It was a close-run race from destitution. In fact, his brother left an impoverished widow unable to provide their daughter with a dowry and within two generations, all of Benedetto’s toil and worry came to naught as his progeny lost it all.

Edward Muir

It's very indirect, but it is an incredibly rare record of someone of maybe no literacy or marginal literacy from the 15th century, keeping track of what's going on with his own business. Now, it's interesting that he is he's in the periphery of the city of Siena, which is a very sophisticated capitalist city. He's right, literally on the edge of the Renaissance. And we look at these Italian cities in the late 15th century, these are the most literate cities in Europe at the time. We think

according to a number of sources that at least men in the port cities in northern Italy, Florence, and Siena, etc., about 40% of those men could read and write, which is pretty high, and a smaller percentage, but many women could as well. So this gives us a glimmer of the people who would otherwise be lost to history. That's ultimately, what I'm worried about.

Mark Bradley

Imagine that we're 100 years forward, right? And historians are trying to figure out, you know, in the 2020s, history was where? They encountered this piece of yours and that's, you know, what they're gonna base a conversation around, what could they recover, as they're looking at that address about where it is the disciplines that right now?

Edward Muir

I'm interested in method. So I'm making a claim that this is a kind of a method, and it's based upon obviously a metaphor, I can't really have a conversation with the dead. This is using the metaphor in a kind of a literal way to say, what it would be like if I assumed that the documents are part of a conversation. All right. And so this is a moment I think in current historical practice in which we're trying to find ways of empathy, I think having a direct understanding of other people's experience. And moment also, and this is perhaps what's lurking behind it a kind of deeper skepticism, about big patterns in history. But we have seen the collapse in my own and your own lifetime, in big ways of thinking. That is to say, Marxism, the literal, you know, the global conflicts of the last part of the 20th century, which were all rooted in kind of different ideological ways of thinking, and we're way away from the experience of common people. So this approach is, is a consequence of that collapse of faith and big thinking, big structures, big patterns, they're still out there. There's no question about it. And then much of history is about that. But it's also at the same time an attempt to find something else some other way of thinking about the past, rather than just seeing cause, effect, big pattern, structures being changed.

Mark Bradley

And yet people worry a bit about fragmentation.

Edward Muir

Sure.

Mark Bradley

And that as that fragmentation happens, it gets harder to talk across a subfield about a set of issues. Method is often thought of as a way to kind of bridge those silos. So do you see a sort

of portability in some ways with these conversations with the dead in the time and place that you think about, in a way that could animate how people in the disciplining other spaces and times are thinking about these kinds of questions?

Edward Muir

I think so, yes. I have a colleague, Amy Stanley, who wrote a book about a woman in 19th-century Japan, who had a series of misadventures in marriage and eventually leaves her little village and goes off to what is now Tokyo. She and I have talked a lot about this. So that's a very different time, different place, different kinds of records, different culture, in which a lot of these ideas are transferable. She's not trying to tell us something about 19th century Japan, as much as she's trying to tell us something about her understanding of a woman's experience in rural Japan and being a migrant into the big city. That's the way I would say, my method, my interest in this could be transferable to lots of different kinds of things. It's all about understanding things on a human level. It's not a replacement for the big patterns of history, which I still read and enjoy, but it is a replacement for, you know, making an assumption that if a peasant is of a subaltern class, to use the academic jargon, okay, that this is the sum total of their experience and that their life was not constructed around the theories and the themes and the ideologies that we have now.

Mark Bradley

Yeah, you're kind of meeting the dead where they're at?

Edward Muir

I'm trying to, yeah. At the same time, knowing they're always gone around the corner to use the metaphor that Simon Schama once used, you know I can't, they don't quite hear me.

Edward Muir (AHA Presidential Address)

My conversations were not encounters with ghosts who come with a message for the living but engagements with documents that offer access to the words, thoughts, feelings, and actions of those who lived in the past, and that might answer my own curiosity. I do not consider the method as a form of proof or a demonstration of why one interpretation might be better than another. The dead do not have agency in these conversations, or perhaps only the agency the documents and I grant them. What the dead represent is not so much their place in some historical schema as their individuality or perhaps their shared experiences with a small group. A conversation with the dead is not a microhistory or a biography. It is just a conversation. The conceit of a conversation helps keep everyone in their proper place—the dead are dead, the living historian has the voice, the agency, and the opportunity to reanimate

the dead as an object of empathy and to give them back their humanity. The dead do not serve the present. They serve themselves, their own time, and their own social situation. They are not our servants. Let them rest in peace, not fight our battles for us, only they can speak the truth about themselves through the evidence they have left. And like Venice's literary nun, I too want to hear the truths the dead can tell us.

Daniel Story

That was now past AHA President Edward Muir delivering the 2024 AHA presidential address in San Francisco. Alongside we heard Ed discuss the address with AHR editor Mark Bradley. Earlier we heard producer Matt Hermane in conversation with historian Brenda Child about the March 2024 History Lab feature on contemporary Indigenous art and history. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review*, in partnership with the American Historical Association, and the University Library at the University of California Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by Matt Hermane Connor Howard and me, Daniel Story, audio engineering and transcription support was by Phoebe Rettberg. You can find more about this in other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.