



Cheyenne White
Arts & Sciences
Undergraduate Research
Fellow
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BA'18, Department of
English

Display/ced Natives, Misplaced Histories

My project “Display/ced Natives: The *Ad Astra* Indian Representing Kansas” researches the *Ad Astra* statue on top of the Kansas Capitol. Specifically, I explore the visual and aesthetic traditions of the native *Ad Astra* figure and why Kansans decided to install a token indigenous statue/representation on top of their Capitol. Looking at this “official Indian”, as Cecile R. Ganteaume calls such representational native figures, I reveal the motives and implications of the Native American dominating the Topeka sky in a state settled by Europeans. During my semester-long research in Fall 2017, I combed through historic newspapers dating back to the 1880s in order to track the journey of the original plan for the capitol topper up to modern reactions to the piece. I also explored Kansas indigenous histories and public representational symbolism through secondary scholarship such as Cecile R. Ganteaume’s Officially Indian: Symbols That Define the United States (2017), Philip Deloria’s Playing Indian (1998), William Unrau’s The Kansa Indians: A History of the Wind People 1673-1873 (1971), and Ronald Parks’ The Darkest Period: The Kanza Indians and Their Last Homeland 1846-1873 (2014). My most exciting research experience was the interview with the ninety-two-year-old artist, Richard Bergen from Salina, who started

crafting the *Ad Astra* figure in 1988. Bergen told me about his creative inspiration and the artistic process of constructing the 22-foot-tall and 4,400-pound (surprisingly) a-historic silicon bronze statue.

I discovered a trend of ambivalent acceptance and identification from Kansans in response to the native *Ad Astra* figure. What is more, I found a stunning lack of accessible educational and contextual information about the native figure, even though the original plans purposefully included a plaza focused on Kansa background, displaying plaques about the history and culture of the Kansa. The noticeable absence of this original portion of the still incomplete project—now unfinished for over 100 years—isolates and decontextualizes the *Ad Astra* figure on top of the Dome. Most importantly, I presented my first draft of a paper on my research at the Kansas Museum Association conference on November 2nd, 2017. My plan for the Spring 2018 semester is to further investigate the relationship between local Native American groups and the European imagery on top of the Capitol and reactions to the figure's visual traditions. I am going to interview members of local Native American communities to gain their perspective and opinions on the sculpture. I will also revise my paper and create a public-facing digital humanities project that incorporates my discoveries alongside images of the figure and of various renditions of the statue, the most accessible sitting in front of the city hall in McPherson, Kansas.