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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 year-long research project (Fall 2017-Spring 2018), 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 paper on my research at the *Kansas Museum Association* conference in Manhattan, Kansas, on November 2nd, 2017 and an expanded version at the *Fourth Annual Midwestern History Conference*, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on June 6th, 2018.

What is more, I developed a public-facing digital humanities project that incorporates my discoveries alongside images of the *Ad Astra* figure and of various historic renditions of the statue, the most accessible of which sits in front of the city hall in McPherson, Kansas. The online webpages can be visited at <https://display-ced-ad-astra.weebly.com/>. My research project wanted to explore the history of the figure to examine why and how Kansans decided that a Native American wielding a bow and arrow would represent them best. How conscious were people about their motives and biases? What does it mean that we, as everyday Kansans, know so little about this figure? What followed is an attempt to better understand the cultural, artistic, and local processes of public memory and how we decide who to remember and who to forget.