The Problem of an Inclusive Art History:
Reconciling the Universal and Particular through Photography

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This thesis addresses the tendency of the representation of the history of cultures that fall outside of the traditional European/American narrative to follow either universalizing or particularizing approaches. The opposing concepts of universalism and particularism not only create tensions between differing ways to view humanity, but also prevent the construction of a truly inclusive and global art historical narrative. While universalism asserts that there are shared elements of humanity uniting us all, it fails to accommodate differences in culture and lived experience. As a result, what is presented as a universal is often exclusive and, therefore, not a true universal. Conversely, while particularism validates these differences, it can be divisive and incomplete through its emphasis on marginalized experiences. When applied to the writing and teaching of art history, both universalist and particularist approaches result in incomplete narratives. Universalist art history, the narrative most often taught at the introductory or undergraduate level, perpetuates the traditional Eurocentric art historical canon and thereby omits marginalized groups or presents them as solely peripheral to the standard canon. Particularist art history focuses solely on these marginalized groups, creating a fragmented narrative that interacts with the traditional canon but is never fully integrated. Thus, in order to create a more inclusive (and truly universal) art historical narrative, it is necessary to find a way to reconcile the two seemingly incompatible approaches of universalism and particularism.

Through a series of case studies examining the works of Augustus Le Plongeon, Timothy O'Sullivan, Man Ray, Edward Weston, Morna Livingston, and Gerardo Suter, photographs of indigenous material culture created in colonized and formerly colonized areas are considered through the lens of the writings of G.W. F. Hegel, Slavoj Žižek, and Judith Butler. While the photographs by Le Plongeon, O'Sullivan, Man Ray, and Weston can be clearly categorized as either universalizing or particularizing, the more contemporary photographs by Livingston and Suter suggest attempts to

visually realize the synthesis of the universal and the particular, albeit through differing approaches. While Livingston's work follows Butler's concept of cultural translation between competing universals, Suter's work displays attempts at revising the past as a movement towards synthesis, recalling Hegel's concept of the concrete universal. Ultimately, this study finds that both Livingston and Suter fall short of fully reconciling the universal and the particular. However, a combination of the approaches of Suter and Livingston, and thus of Butler and Hegel, appears to be an ideal solution to the task of fully synthesizing the particular into the universal.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the tendency of the representation of the history of cultures outside of the traditional European/American narrative to follow either universalizing or particularizing approaches. The opposing concepts of universalism and particularism not only create tensions between different ways to view humanity, but also prevent the construction of an inclusive and global art historical narrative. While universalism asserts that there are shared elements of humanity uniting us all, it fails to accommodate differences in culture and lived experience. As a result, what is presented as a universal is often exclusive and, therefore, not a true universal. Conversely, while particularism validates these differences, it can be divisive and incomplete through its emphasis on marginalized experiences.

When applied to the writing and teaching of art history, both universalist and particularist approaches result in incomplete narratives. Universalist art history, the narrative most often taught at the introductory or undergraduate level, perpetuates the traditional Eurocentric art historical canon and thereby omits marginalized groups or presents them as periphery. Particularist art history focuses solely on these marginalized groups, creating a fragmented narrative that interacts with the traditional canon but is never fully integrated within it. Thus, in order to create a more inclusive (and truly universal) art historical narrative, it is necessary to find a way to reconcile the two seemingly incompatible approaches of universalism and particularism.

Through a series of case studies examining the works of Augustus Le Plongeon, Timothy O'Sullivan, Man Ray, Edward Weston, Morna Livingston, and Gerardo Suter, photographs of indigenous material culture created in colonized and formerly colonized areas are considered through the lens of the writings of G.W.F. Hegel, Slavoj Žižek, and Judith Butler. In each case, the photographer renegotiated the historical, social, and cultural contexts of what they visually

recorded, either through formal abstraction or the creation of a mythical setting through an emphasis on difference. The two described approaches to these photographic works embody the theoretical dichotomy of universality versus particularity; while the photographs of O'Sullivan and Weston utilize formal abstraction and demonstrate a desire for universality, Le Plongeon and Man Ray instead focused on particularity, inventing entirely new circumstances surrounding what they photographed. However, both approaches result in the removal of context and the erasure or overwriting of the narratives of past cultures, disregarding the cultural history of the objects and structures photographed. This obfuscation of history demonstrates an unintended exertion of power and perceived cultural superiority by the photographers over the cultures who created the original works. As such, the practice reveals a lingering trace of imperialism that has persisted throughout photographic history.

While the photographs by Le Plongeon, O'Sullivan, Man Ray, and Weston can be clearly categorized as either universalizing or particularizing, the more contemporary photographs of Livingston and Suter suggest attempts to visually realize the synthesis of the universal and the particular, albeit through differing approaches. While Livingston combines the particular with elements of the universal in a way that is much in line with Butler's idea of the necessity of cultural translation in reconciling competing universals (or differing universals tied to particular groups or temporalities), Suter follows Hegel's dialectical approach, revising and renegotiating the abstract universal to accommodate the particular through the process of working towards achieving a true concrete universality. Ultimately, both photographers make progress in the reconciliation of universalism and particularism but fail to completely synthesize the two ideas. Livingston fails to merge the particular into the universal, resulting in a tension between distinct particulars relabeled as competing universals, while Suter fails to fully synthesize the two concepts, resulting in a universal that contains elements of the particular, but does not fully incorporate the particular into

the universal. However, by combining the approaches of both photographers, in effect merging the two approaches suggested by Butler and Hegel, we can integrate the particular into the universal through a continuous series of revisions and renegotiations. As a result, the dominant art historical narrative can be revisited, reworked, and indeed rewritten to include and emphasize particular narratives and values, working to shift the primary narrative from an abstract universal to a more inclusive and complete narrative of the history of art.

THE UNIVERSAL

In a general sense, the universal pertains to communal values, experiences, or knowledge that enable a uniform understanding which unites the whole of humanity and supersedes difference, without exception. Universalism is equality-seeking and champions the idea of a shared human experience, a commonality between all of humankind that deems them one and the same. Supporters of universalism believe human rights and freedoms to be inherent and intrinsic, and that therefore there exists a common set of standards for ethics and values that pertains to all cultures, religions, and similar groups.[1] At first consideration, universalism seems an ideal approach to the world; a common humanity would, in theory, mean less conflict and a more harmonious, egalitarian society. However, a continued focus on universals without regard for marginalized views threatens to erase essential differences in values, beliefs, social standards, and cultural experiences that influence the way individuals from different cultures navigate and perceive the world.

Identifying a true universal is more complicated than it might at first seem. For example, in his promotion of civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr.'s strategy was to appeal to the supposed universal notion of the content of character as the legitimate basis on which all humans should be judged. But who decides the ideal content of one's character? Who decides the scale with which this

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1   István Lakatos, "Thoughts on Universalism versus Cultural Relativism with Special Attention to Women's Rights," *Pécs Journal of International and European Law* I (2018): 10.

content should be evaluated? Do one's actions or intentions hold more weight in this evaluation? The field becomes even more muddied when we move into a cultural context that is well removed from our own. Female genital modification, for instance, has been banned in many countries and is widely considered a human rights violation. While it seems straightforward that women and children should have the right to bodily autonomy, the banning of this practice infringes on the ability of even consenting adult women to willingly take part in an important cultural rite. Even minimally invasive procedures are met with the same resistance as the most extreme practices and labeled as violent and unnecessary despite being less intrusive than equivalent procedures commonly performed on western males.[2] Although implemented in an effort to preserve the right of women and children to bodily autonomy and physical safety, bans of these procedures also prevent the practicing of cultural traditions that are relatively safe and include informed consent of individuals involved. It is sometimes unclear where the lines should be drawn when it comes to so-called universals and, as a result, boundaries are decided using limited culture-based views of what qualifies as universals without full consideration of particular values. As Donald Brown asserts, "there are severe methodological limitations on what can be known about universals in general. No one can really know the conditions in all societies, so any statement about universality is based on some sort of sampling. In most cases this sampling has not been rigorous."[3] Without knowing and considering the specifics of all relevant cultures, beliefs, practices, and histories, it is nearly impossible to make an informed and objective assessment regarding what can be considered a universal.

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2   Samuel Kimani and Bettina Shell-Duncan, "Medicalized Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Contentious Practices and Persistent Debates," *Current Sexual Health Reports* 10, no. 1 (March 2018): 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11930-018-0140-y.

3   Donald E. Brown, "Human Universals, Human Nature & Human Culture," *Daedalus* 133, no. 4 (2004): 49.

The common approach to universalism has historically been to assert the dominant view of "the ambiguous cultural space called the West" onto all cultures outside of this group. This tendency for the universal to align with the dominant power is so pervasive that it prompted Ernesto Laclau to declare "there is no universality which is not a hegemonic universality."[4] This means that the universals that are claimed to exist are dependent on the views of a particular group. As a result, such an approach is systematically connected to the colonial oppression of difference and the idea that Europe is the origin and center of modernity. Such an approach to the universal is, Omar Acha notes, "an immediate expression of a process of domination of the other; of the subjugation of otherness to the Same."[5] Such claimed universals, which hold western ideology to be representative of all of human ideology, not only fail to account for and include difference, but aim to eliminate it. When combined with the dominant idea of western, white, and male as the universal standard, this creates a narrative of western superiority that is difficult to overwrite. As Butler asserted, "any attempt to install a universalism beyond the bounds of political contests is connected irremediably to cultural imperialism," as it eliminates difference by impressing a supposed universal normative culture on any particular deemed as inferior under the guise of the greater good.[6] The notion of universality has been used as a means of extending colonialist understandings of the world, promoting a racist understanding of "civilized man," and excluding particular groups and individuals from the universal category of the "human."[7]

The commonly held notion of universality is that of a false, abstract universalism which fails to address the many exclusions within it. A universal's very claim to universality is lost through its

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4   Ernesto Laclau, "Structure, History and the Political," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 193.
5   Omar Acha, "The Places of Critical Universalism: Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches in Context," in *Philosophy of Globalization*, ed. Concha Roldán, Daniel Brauer, and Johannes Rohbeck (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 96, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110492415-008.
6   Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib et al. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.
7   Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 38.

failure to accommodate every person. Those who are not included or remain unrepresented by the universal's general will do not reach the level of being recognized as human within its boundaries.[8] Hegel objected to this concept of abstract universality, arguing that it was solipsistic and ignored the inherent sociality of humankind.[9] As he described, this abstract universality fails to embrace all particulars and, as it is built upon a fundamental hostility towards the particular, such a universality only serves to perpetuate the very hostility on which it was founded.[10] However, Žižek insists that we must not let the shortcomings of universality cause us to dismiss the idea entirely, saying "the obvious old Marxist point about how there is no neutral universality… should not seduce us into abandoning universality as such. If we do this, we obliterate the fact that our very argumentation against false universalities speaks from the position of true universality (which enables us to perceive the position of the underprivileged as unjust)."[11] Therefore, in Žižek's view, the universal, even if it is false or incomplete, is still necessary in order to recognize the instances where the universal fails.

As Butler notes, the universal only remains the universal if it continues to be "untainted" by that which is "particular, concrete, and individual."[12] Thus, abstract universality is fundamentally dependent on this erasure of the individual in favor of the totality. As such, it is impossible to incorporate the excluded particular into an abstract universal without first negating the particular, only confirming that such a universality cannot be achieved without the destruction of what it claims to include.[13]

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8   Butler, 23.
9   Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic, with the Zusätze: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. Théodore F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), para. 24.
10   Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), para. 594.
11   Slavoj Žižek, "Troubles with Identity," *The Philosophical Salon* (blog), May 28, 2018, https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/troubles-with-identity/.
12   Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 23.
13   Butler, 24.

Žižek has insisted that "every universality is exclusive and that's what is good about it."[14] From Žižek's view, depriving groups of their cultural or ethnic roots can create a space for a new universality to grow and develop, and thus marginalized groups should not be "allowed" their particularity, but instead, they should be permitted "to participate in our universality."[15] However, this is akin to asking marginalized groups to abandon their cultural identity and personal lived experiences in favor of the dominant identity, and Žižek's statement functions as a weak justification of the act of forcing an exclusive false universal onto the individuals it excludes. The notion of a universal that is inclusive of marginalized groups is ideal, but going about it in a way which merely permits individuals from these particular groups to adapt to join an already existent universal based on Eurocentric white male views, beliefs, and values continues the colonialist missions of conquering other cultures and forcing assimilation. Žižek's approach also seems to suggest a form of radical universalism, which implies a form of cultural imperialism through its refusal to consider particularities and its denying of national, cultural, and ethical autonomy in favor of the cosmopolitan community.[16] Thus, Žižek's universal, as well as most approaches to the universal, is a failed, abstract universal. In order for a universal to be a true universal, it must be able to acknowledge and include all particulars without eliminating them. As our world becomes more and more interconnected, the search for true universals becomes increasingly complicated.

THE PARTICULAR

In contrast to universalism, particularism, sometimes referred to as cultural relativism, sets out to disrupt the master narrative of history by including those that were previously excluded. Particularism argues that our world experience is fundamentally unique to and dependent on our cultural or social groups and attempts to validate these different world experiences by focusing on

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14 Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek "Thinking the Human,"* Axworthy Distinguished Lecture Series on Social Justice and the Public Good (University of Winnipeg, 2019), 1:10:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38alQSKtVbA.
15 Žižek, 1:10:12.
16 Lakatos, "Thoughts on Universalism versus Cultural Relativism," 25.

narrowly defined topics, groups, experiences, or explanations of specifically defined events rather than on building a conceptual or theoretical framework to explain a broad range of events and values.[17] Furthermore, particularism views every society or group culture as a collective representation of their specific historical past and sets of characteristics that develop independent, but not isolated, from all other groups.

As Franz Boas, a pioneer of modern anthropology whose ideas would later be renamed *historical particularism*, noted in *Race, Language and Culture,* "a critical investigation rather shows that forms of thought and action which we are inclined to consider as based on human nature are not generally valid, but characteristic of our specific culture."[18] Particularism views a common history, culture, or set of values for all humanity as not only undesirable but impossible to attain. Instead, these ideas are developed within cultural and social groups and not governed by any universal laws. As such, the values, beliefs, activities, and histories of a group or individual should be considered in terms of their own specific culture. By encouraging the consideration of alternative viewpoints, stories, and experiences that have been historically excluded, particularism allows us to recover the overlooked cultural and historical diversity of the past and thereby challenge the traditional narrative, creating a more inclusive and complete version of history.[19] However, critics of particularism, such as Shelby Steele, argue that in our efforts to defend and promote particularity, we overlook the importance of so-called human universals. As a result, Steele sees particulars such as racial identity as threatening to individuality, and the neoconservatives following the same thought process see particular identity as robbing a person of a significant part of their universal humanity.[20]

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17   John Gerring, "The Perils of Particularism: Political History after Hartz," *Journal of Policy History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 314.

18   Franz Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 258.

19   Joyce Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 2 (September 1992): 431.

20   Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

Mahmood Mamdani notes that the creation of difference was once utilized as an invaluable colonial tool, noting that the idea of the "native" was a construction that made it possible to outcast such individuals from society.[21] Indeed, the clear binary that came to be associated with the "other" was developed and encouraged through Sir Henry Maine's political theories. The distinguishing of the West versus the non-West, and thus the settler versus the native, led to certain associations that became prevalent throughout history: the settler as "modern" and "civilized" and the native as "traditional" and "savage." This binary worked to divide the settler and the native into two entirely separate conceptual worlds. However, the fact that difference was sometimes manufactured with imperialist motives does not erase the existence of those differences after the fact, nor does it negate the effects they have on lived experiences. As much as the acknowledgment of cultural differences could be considered a colonialist act, the rejection or refusal of difference (such as through forced assimilation) could also be an act of totalitarian rule.

Still, too great of an emphasis on particularity has been shown to lead to an us-versus-them mentality and, eventually, radical particularism, which views group or cultural identity as the only source of validity within a society.[22] The turn towards particular group identity and identity politics is often a reaction to a desire to "compensate for what capitalist subjectivity lacks."[23] However, this turn also produces populist movements such as Nazism, the national front, MAGA, and Islamic fundamentalism. Populist identity is dependent on negative references to and associations with the particular. As Žižek puts it, without a Jewish person, there is no Nazi.[24] Thus, without particularity, populism would cease to exist.

Some amount of particularity, however, is always unavoidable. Humans have a profound evolutionary tendency to form groups, be they determined by culture, religion, values, or other

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21 Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2–3.
22 Lakatos, "Thoughts on Universalism versus Cultural Relativism," 14.
23 Todd McGowan, "The Particularity of the Capitalist Universal," *Continental Thought and Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 1, no. 4 (2017): 474.
24 Žižek, "Troubles with Identity."

shared experiences. However, in *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau demonstrates how no identity is ever complete in its effort towards self-determination. Any particular identity is understood as tied to a specific context (such as race, ethnicity, or gender). What each of these particular identities shares is a fundamental incompleteness. A particular identity is established entirely through its difference from an infinite set of other identities.[25] As a result, an excessive focus on particularity can have an extremely divisive effect on society, in addition to continuing the process of "othering" that has been practiced for centuries.

Žižek claims that "identity politics reaches its peak (or, rather, its lowest point) when it refers to the unique experience of a particular group identity as the ultimate fact which cannot be dissolved in any universality: 'only a woman/lesbian/trans/Black/Chinese knows what is it to be a woman/lesbian/trans/Black/Chinese.' "[26] Žižek calls for individuals to instead return to the notion that "all cultures and identities can be understood, provided that one makes an effort to get it." Such an assumption, however, is inherently flawed. An individual's values and beliefs, and thus what one considers to be a universal, are unavoidably influenced by their life experience. While making an effort to understand the experiences of others is important in that it allows for greater empathy across differences, this does not lead to knowing "what it is to be" a member of a particular group or to experience the world in the way a member of that group would. As a white, heterosexual, cisgender male, Žižek has had a specific life experience, and his version of a universal most likely varies significantly from a black homosexual female or a transgender Latino. The fact that the universal standard view of the world is still white, heterosexual, and cisgender makes it nearly impossible for the values and experiences of particular groups to find their way into common discourse unless steps are taken to allow voices and narratives directly from these groups to be represented.

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25 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 30.
26 Žižek, "Troubles with Identity."

Recently, the embracing of particularism has lost steam. As Ien Ang suggests, as the fragmentation and disorientation caused by globalization further develop, the desires for unified national identity and integration have become more pronounced, resulting in an embracing of universalism.[27] Still, Ang notes that "as a practical policy of social inclusion and diversity management, [particularism] is still of immense importance at a local level — in neighborhoods, schools, healthcare, and so on — where the need to respond to diverse constituencies is simply unavoidable." This emphasis on the universal while still acknowledging that great value exists in the particular has led to the problem of finding a means to integrate the ideal of unity with the reality of multiple cultural, socioeconomic, religious, and other groups. As Ang prompts: "How can we recognize diversity as integral and intrinsic to [a] nation's history and not just as a decorative afterthought? How can we develop a more diverse, shared, as well as open and living sense of heritage, something that all groups and communities contribute to, including those whose stories and voices are generally marginalized from the canonical national history?"[28] Indeed, this is a question that countless academics have struggled to answer. While universalist attempts at writing history often fail to include marginalized groups, particularist methods are often divisive and further separate the particular group from the primary narrative. Therefore, it is necessary to find a synthesis of the two approaches that serves to reconcile the concepts of both the universal and the particular in order to create a more complete and inclusive historical narrative.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF UNIVERSALITY AND PARTICULARITY

The relationship between the universal and the particular is necessarily intertwined and dialectical. According to Theodor Adorno:

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27 Ien Ang, "Beyond Multiculturalism: A Journey to Nowhere?," *Humanities Research*, Compelling Cultures: Representing Cultural Diversity and Cohesion in Multicultural Australia, XV, no. 2 (2009): 18–19.
28 Ien Ang, "Intertwining Histories: Heritage and Diversity, NSW History Council Lecture, Government House, Sydney, September 24, 2001.," Australian Humanities Review 24 (December 2001), http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2002/12/01/intertwining-histories-heritage-and-diversity/.

> …of a particular, nothing can be predicated without definition and thus without universality, and yet this does not submerge the moment of something particular, something opaque, which that prediction refers to and is based upon. It is maintained within the constellation, else dialectics would end up hypostatizing mediation without preserving the moments of immediacy, as Hegel prudently wished to do everywhere else.[29]

The particular is established through the universal, and it is, in turn, what gives the universal a concrete manifestation. The very existence of the particular inflicts limitations and restrictions on the universal, while the universal simultaneously restricts the particular through its denotation as the "other." Particularity is also self-establishing. By the particular being in nature exclusive, it removes itself from the context of the universal. Conversely, the universal is always, necessarily, at least partially particular, as it is determined by a specific set of values and ideals. Furthermore, what appears to be particular in one circumstance or context could be considered universal in another, and there is not yet, nor will there likely ever be, an intercultural consensus regarding the specific boundaries of what should and not should be considered universal.

For Hegel, the category of the universal signified the final developed state of human freedom as the actuality of reason. This state is achieved when reason is able to reflect upon and fully comprehend itself and is only possible when it is able to transcend the limitations of its particularity.[30] However, this process of universalization has a distinct temporal (premodern/modern) and geographical (East/West) span, and it is therefore limited to a particular. Paula Moya notes that if "the universal subjects is figured implicitly as the bourgeois heterosexual European male, then any feature that diverges from that norm … will be seen as culturally particular and epistemically irrelevant."[31] However, once we acknowledge that this claimed universal subject is, in actuality, the bourgeois heterosexual European male, we are closer to being able to consider

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29 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 328–29.
30 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 54, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167567.
31 Paula M.L. Moya, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 124.

him as a being rooted in a particular space and time. As a result, such an understanding of the universal is a particular one.

The interaction between universality and particularity does not always yield positive results. Exceptionalism stems from the interplay between particularity and abstract universality when a particular interpretation of what qualifies as universal values results in the belief that the "greater good" of all of humanity is utterly reliant on the exceptionalist state. As Meghana Nayak and Christopher Malone put it, US Exceptionalism, by far the most common example, consists of "an unwavering belief in the uniqueness of the United States and a commitment to a providential mission to transform the rest of the world in the image of the United States."[32] Exceptionalism typically meets five main criteria: a mission to "liberate" other groups in the name of a proclaimed "common good," a belief that the exceptionalist state is exempt from or above external limitations and restrictions, a consistent creations of an "external enemy" in a hostile world filled with "universal threats," and the framing of the state as an innocent victim.[33] Such a framework works to legitimize various transgressions, even in international law, such as military interventions misleadingly labeled as missions to spread freedom.[34]

Additionally, the idea of universalism has been utilized in acts of devaluing the voices of particular groups. A clear example of this is when the Black Lives Matter movement's campaign against institutionalized violence toward black Americans was countered with cries of "All Lives Matter," a claim that demonstrated a clear interest in the perceived universals of humankind. However, such a stance failed to recognize that the message behind the movement was never that only black lives matter, or that the universal should be rejected in favor of support of only the

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32 Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (June 2009): 260.

33 Kalevi J. Holsti, "Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is It Exceptional?," *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 3 (September 2011): 384–94.

34 Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann, "Comparative Exceptionalism: Universality and Particularity in Foreign Policy Discourses," *International Studies Review* 2 (2019): 13.

particular, but rather that the supposed universal value of life should be applicable even to the marginalized particular.

According to Butler, social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, play an important role in the development of the universal. The incommensurability of the universal and particular means that any claimed universal can only be, at best, a historically defined universal which is always open to renegotiation.[35] When particular groups demand inclusion in universality it creates a contradiction that calls for the adjustment of the universal and makes it clear that the scope of the universal needs to be expanded in order to become closer to its aim of being universal.[36]

THE NEED FOR AN INCLUSIVE ART HISTORY

As Terry Smith noted in "Inside Out, Outside In: Changing Perspectives in Australian Art Historiography," while even the earliest texts covering Australian Art referenced Aboriginal art, it was not covered in detail until 1991, when Smith himself contributed the chapter "From the Desert: Australian Painting 1970 –1990" to *Australian Painting*. Still, in that book, Aboriginal art was only addressed in one of its sixteen chapters.[37] This omission of indigenous cultures from the history of art is far from unusual. As any student who has sat through an introduction to art history class can attest to, so-called "non-Western Art" — art that falls outside of that traditional art historical canon, often referred to as "primitive art"— is typically relocated to the sidelines as an afterthought, and grouped with numerous particulars into a conglomerated other.

The notion of "primitive art" is itself ambiguous, creating confusion due to the multitude of meanings that the term *primitive* may carry within the discipline of art history. "Primitive art" might be used to refer not only to art created by peoples who fall outside of the "great centers of

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35 Judith Butler, "Dynamic Conclusions," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 161.

36 Maya Lloyd, "(Women's) Human Rights: Paradoxes and Possibilities," *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 97.

37 Terry Smith, "Inside Out, Outside In: Changing Perspectives in Australian Art Historiography," *Journal of Art Historiography* 4 (2011): 12.

civilization," reflecting the assumption that cultures outside the dominant ones were necessarily less advanced, but also to earlier periods in the european art historical canon and even work created by, or in the style of, artists lacking formal training.[38] Merely replacing the name with an alternate term (such as subaltern art, world art, ethnic art, or even indigenous art) does little to correct the issue, as the idea of the "primitive" is still a western ideological construct which classifies culture through an evolutionary view. This view labels the culture of non-European indigenous people as less-developed and refuses their art the possibility of having enough complexity and contemporaneity of expression to deem it worthy of the term "art" without a qualifier. Such an approach to the assignment of the label of "art" reinforces the false belief that the western world (namely Europe and its colonies) was the driving force behind the development of culture and civilized society.

Arguing for the decentering of Europe within the art historical canon, scholars of global art histories such as Morris Low, Christopher Pinney, Nicolas Peterson, and John Tagg, have worked to build a more inclusive narrative of art history that does not present non-Western art as derivative, periphery, or merely an appendix to established history.[39] This effort to integrate and emphasize marginalized voices, artists, and narratives into the standard art historical narrative has worked to place the progression of art historical style and method within a global framework — one that challenges, questions, and rejects the traditional narrative based on a clearly outlined timeline centered on the West.[40]

However, while scholars within the field of art history have attempted to move away from the notion of a master art historical narrative or canonical art history, the manner in which it is taught in undergraduate institutions has shown little progress. Anna Brzyski has noted that "despite the extensive nature of the critiques of canonicity and their wide acceptance, mainstream art history

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38 Susan Lowish, "Writing/Righting a History of Australian Aboriginal Art," *Humanities Research* XV, no. 2 (2009): 143.
39 Andrew Gayed and Siobhan Angus, "Visual Pedagogies: Decolonizing and Decentering the History of Photography," *Studies in Art Education* 59, no. 3 (August 2018): 231–32.
40 Gayed and Angus, 231–32.

continues to embrace canonical logic in its day to day operations, research, presentation of scholarship, pedagogy, and curatorial practice."[41] According to a study by Andrew Gayed and Siobhan Angus, while upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars are primarily concerned with analyzing complex issues such as those of power and representation, the introductory courses are typically presented as "the most straightforward, 'comprehensible' history," sacrificing detail, complexity, and varying viewpoints in favor of making the information more easily digestible and understandable to beginning or lower-level scholars.[42] This canonical history itself functions as "a mechanism of oppression, a guardian or privilege, and a vehicle for exclusion through which structures of class, gender, and race are hidden." While scholars have attempted to open the field up to a complicated and globalized history, the approach in the classroom tends to favor the more traditional narrative in introductory foundational classes.[43]

In 1999, Gloria Ladson-Billings suggested that within the field of education most, if not all, histories "perpetuate a Master Narrative that is rarely rejected or disrupted" and provide few "entry points" for individuals to suggest or explore ideas that diverge too far from the primary narrative.[44] While the past twenty years have seen an effort to move away from such practices and approaches to historical narrative, our current methods are still imperfect. Contemporary culturally responsive teaching strives to incorporate a secondary narrative that provides the entry points necessary to allow all students the opportunity to engage with course content fully, creating a platform for many voices to be heard and used in the creation and construction of knowledge.[45] However, there is still a heavy reliance on the established Master Narrative. As Geneva Gay noted, seventy to ninety percent of all classroom instruction is based on textbooks, and most textbooks used in schoolroom settings

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41 Anna Brzyski, ed., *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
42 Gayed and Angus, "Visual Pedagogies," 229.
43 Gayed and Angus, 232.
44 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Preparing Teachers for Diverse Student Populations: A Critical Race Theory Perspective," *Review of Research in Education* 24 (1999): 211–47.
45 Joni Boyd Acuff, Brent Hirak, and Mary Nangah, "Dismantling a Master Narrative: Using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to Teach the History of Art," *Art Education* 65, no. 5 (September 2012): 6–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2012.11519186.

are controlled and written by the dominant group.[46] These texts reaffirm the dominant group's status and contributions, presenting European American subjective experiences and interpretations as objective truths. Histories that do not fit into the narrative of these textbooks are treated as side notes or distinct subjects outside of general art history.

The emphasis on a universal shared "humanity" created from a Eurocentric viewpoint causes the erasure of "difference" when stories and histories of groups considered to be the "other" are narrated; this is what Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes termed a "flattening effect."[47] This flattening stems from the assumption that understanding is dependent on cultural identity— not just on the awareness of the existence of other cultural identities, but also that these identities are in some way identifiable with one's own.[48] However, multicultural pedagogies tend to rely on inclusive narratives that aim to make difference more acceptable to "normative" readers, effectively taming these differences in order to make the content more relatable to students' own experiences and identities.

Gayed and Angus suggest an approach to introductory art history education that instead emphasizes indigenous histories and perspectives while incorporating a broader geographic structure into the syllabus to highlight the distinction between postcolonialism and settler colonialism.[49] It is necessary to question the ideologies and systemic structures that ground the traditional approach to teaching an introduction to art history in order to integrate a more trans-global, critical approach into foundational learning. Such an approach would allow for the creation of a new art historical narrative that is not only more thorough and accurate but more accessible as well. Steps must be taken to broaden the scope of introductory art history to include nontraditional narratives and feature works, artists, and concepts that fall outside of the traditional canon. This

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46 Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 113.
47 Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, "Flattening Effects: Composition's Multicultural Imperative and the Problem of Narrative Coherence," *College Composition and Communication* 65, no. 3 (February 2014): 431.
48 Alexander and Rhodes, 438.
49 Gayed and Angus, "Visual Pedagogies," 230.

decentering must be a process in which educators accept responsibility for and ownership of the canons they teach, and take steps to reinforce their restructured canons through the artworks and texts studied. As Alexander and Rhodes note, a critical multicultural pedagogical approach must recognize both our common humanity and the critical differences and radical alterity of varying experiences.[50] The key is to embrace both without changing either beyond recognition.

The clear need for a more inclusive art historical narrative does not mean that it is an easy endeavor to develop one, nor that any move towards a holistic and global approach to the field will be accepted without criticisms. Earlier this year, it was announced that Yale University was eliminating their foundational art historical survey courses in an effort to create a more global and inclusive introductory narrative that better represented the reality of the history of art. While a substitution for the standard western, white and male-dominated survey narrative is planned to be developed within two to three years, it will not be framed as an introductory survey to the entirety of the field.[51] "Essential to this decision," a statement by the department reads, "is the department's belief that no one survey course taught in the space of a semester could ever be comprehensive, and that no one survey course can be taken as the definitive survey of our discipline."[52] As an alternative to the standard survey, the university is instead offering four specialized introductory classes surrounding changing themes such as "Global Sacred Art," and "The Politics of representation," designed to transcend traditional geographical, chronological, and cultural boundaries.

The move has been met with mixed reactions, prompting department chair and course instructor Tim Barringer to note, "it's an interesting reflection on the current media ecology that the modest, incremental and generous changes being introduced to Yale's curriculum could lead to an astonishing outburst of reactionary moral outrage online."[53] Extreme negative reactions, largely

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50 Alexander and Rhodes, "Flattening Effects," 431.
51 Margaret Hedeman and Matt Kristoffersen, "Art History Department to Scrap Survey Course," Yale Daily News, January 24, 2020, https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2020/01/24/art-history-department-to-scrap-survey-course/.
52 Tim Barringer, "A Letter to CAA Members from the History of Art Department at Yale University," CAA, February 3, 2020, https://www.collegeart.org/news/2020/02/03/tim-barringer-yale-art-history-letter/.
53 Barringer.

from conservative-leaning media outlets, have ranged from comparison to Stalin's censoring of art that was deemed "devoid of any progressive, civilizing value for soviet visitors,"[54] to dismissing the faculty as "a band of hyper-educated Visigoths."[55] Critics called the move "absurd" and demonstrative of "the emphasis on diversity quotas over knowledge,"[56] an act of barbarism,[57] and "just another example of our system of higher miseducation trying to destroy American education in favor of pushing anti-American and racist ideologies."[58] Even more moderate critics have taken [59]issue with the change. Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight commented that "As far as mistakes go, this one is colossal," although his subsequent remarks appear to clarify his position as not so much opposed to the inclusion of marginalized narratives, but as a believer that it is possible to address some of these concerns within the boundaries of a survey course.[60]

Artist and critic Alexander Adams denounced the decision, accusing Yale of "turning its back" on the canon and therefore overcomplicating the process of learning an art historical narrative. "The idea of art being developed incrementally and sequentially to reach an apex of perfection is a touch straightforward," Adams noted, "but it is not unreasonable to think that Cimabue led to Giotto and Masaccio then, eventually Michelangelo. It may not be wholly accurate

54 James Panero, "Stalin at Yale: Art History for the Age of Identity Politics," Spectator USA, January 28, 2020, https://spectator.us/stalin-yale-art-history/.

55 Tiffany Jenkins, "Barbarians at Yale: PC Idiocy Kills Classic Art History Class," New York Post, January 27, 2020, https://nypost.com/2020/01/27/barbarians-at-yale-pc-idiocy-kills-classic-art-history-class/.

56 Madeline Fry, "At History Is Too White, Too Male for Yale," Washington Examiner, January 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/art-history-is-too-white-too-male-for-yale.

57 Jenkins, "Barbarians at Yale: PC Idiocy Kills Classic Art History Class."

58 Warner Todd Huston, "Yale University Dumps Famed Art History Course Because It Is 'Too White,'" The Washington Sentinel, January 25, 2020, https://thewashingtonsentinel.com/yale-university-dumps-famed-art-history-course-because-it-is-too-white/.

59 Christopher Knight, "Seriously, Yale? Seriously? As Mistakes Go, This One Is Colossal. Oof.," Twitter Post, 10:49 PM, January 10, 2020, https://twitter.com/KnightLAT/status/1220946747838484480.

60 Christopher Knight, "'I Don't Mistake a History of European Painting for the History of All Art in All Places.' Um, Does Anybody," Twitter Post, 10:56 PM, January 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/KnightLAT/status/1220948531932016640; Christopher Knight, "'The [New] Class Will Also Consider Art in Relation to "Questions of Gender, Class, and 'Race'" and Discuss Its Involvement with Wester Capitalism...' Um, Why Hasn't the Old Class Been Doing That for the Last, Oh, 50 Years?," Twitter Post, 11:00 PM, January 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/KnightLAT/status/1220949463490940928; Christopher Knight, "'...Designed in Recognition of an Essential Truth: That There Has Never Been Just One Story of the History of Art.' Um, Is This Just Being Discovered at Yale?," Twitter Post, 11:05 PM, January 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/KnightLAT/status/1220950763205083137.

but it is comprehensible and easy to remember. In the same way we have mnemonics to learn the spectrum and sequence of planets, so the canon teaches us an art tradition."[61] The challenging of the traditional canon that he observes as having started with feminist criticism in the 1960s has lead to what he deems as a "crisis" to art history. The resulting narrative is, according to Adams, essentially the "death" of the canon, as it has become incoherent and incomprehensible. "This revised canon," Adams claims, "is unmanageably vast. Impossible to teach, memorize or explain, the expanded, diluted, discredited canon ceases functioning as a reliable guide and it is dropped."[62] While some students welcome the changes, others have expressed concern about the effectiveness of eliminating the survey structure, questioning the completeness of the new introductory courses and how this change might impact their education.[63]

Such a response to the change in course offerings of an institution highlights the complexities of the task of developing an inclusive narrative, as well as fundamental differences in views regarding the most effective way to introduce new scholars to the field of art history. At the same time, the conservative outrage that has been seen since the announcement only serves to further demonstrate the need for changes in the approach to art history, as critics of the decision consistently assert the belief that art history is necessarily primarily white and male and that introductory survey classes should reflect that history.

Ladson-Billings, Gayed, Angus, and the Yale art history department are essentially advocating for an approach to history that explores the specific narratives of alterity and difference while simultaneously making broad claims about generalities through the lens of the particular.[64] The potential flaw in this approach, however, is that rather than destroying the structure of history that focuses on certain dominant groups, they are instead shifting the focus to a new set of groups.

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61 Alexander Adams, "Woke Yale Stops Teaching 'Problematic' European Art Canon, Proving We No Longer Deserve the Classics," RT.com, February 3, 2020, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/479975-yale-european-art-course/.
62 Adams.
63 Hedeman and Kristoffersen, "Art History Department to Scrap Survey Course."
64 Gerring, "The Perils of Particularism," 316.

Rather than focusing on the stories of white, protestant male elites, historians are now increasingly turning their attention to the historically ignored and disenfranchised (women, minorities, and the LGBTQ community, to name a few). Thus, a new collection of categories has merely supplanted the previous ones, and no lasting change in approach has been achieved.[65] What is needed, rather than just shifting the viewpoint from which history is told, is a synthesis of the universal and the particular within the construction of historical and art historical narrative.

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

There is tension in any attempt to negotiate a synthesis of the universal and the particular. How do we eliminate discrimination without accepting the premise that significant difference exists? How do we promote a universalism without automatically denying and negating individual and group experience? The very nature of history creates a unique problem of universality. Every event that occurs in history impacts, in some capacity, the lives, experiences, and expectations of a plurality of human individuals.[66] But how do we gauge whether an event has had an impact on humanity as a whole (making it a universal event) or if the effect is limited to a specific group of people? The idea of universal history and meaning suggests that history is a substance that is similar to *Weltgeist*, wherein the more we progress through time, the more advanced our culture becomes.[67] It also requires the assumption that it is impossible for parallel interpretations of a singular idea or event in history to exist. Such a history denies all aspects of the particular.

Nathan Rotenstreich argues that while history is a universal manifestation of humankind's attitude to the passing of time, this does not mean that history is defaultly universal, or that there is a universal meaning of the time sequence. As Rotenstreich observes, "there is a clash…between the various strata of the universal aspect of history and its particular aspects. This clash is not due to the

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65 Gerring, 316.
66 Nathan Rotenstreich, "Universalism and Particularism in History," *The Review of Metaphysics* 37, no. 1 (September 1983): 27.
67 Rotenstreich, 29.

stubbornness of individuals or groups of people, neither to their arbitrary decisions nor to ideological deceptions. It is due to the *very ontology of history as a human affair which has to do justice to the complexity and the manifoldness of existence in time.*"[68] As meaning is conferred through the mediation of human experience, there will always be differences in how individual groups render the meaning of the time sequence.

Hegel saw history as a process of the development of a universal Spirit. This development was entirely dependent on the nation (groups) aiming and desiring to become a state, as "a nation with no state formation (a mere nation) has, strictly speaking, no history."[69] Problematically, Hegel's approach excludes pre-capitalist America and Africa, as well as many other populations, as they are considered in his view to be "without history." According to Lucia Pradella, in Hegel's work, "the native populations of America are presented as the lowest race and the least capable of culture — indeed, any development the American continent has enjoyed can only be credited to their European colonizers. These populations could not be educated, colonized, nor reduced to slavery."[70] This treatment of native American history and culture can be read as an attempt to rationalize European colonial genocide of indigenous cultures, and hardly suggests a universal history.

For Hegel, there were three methods of writing history. The first were *original* (written during the same historical period it is recording) and *reflective* (written after the historical period has passed, allowing for reflective thought and interpretation of events and meaning).[71] The final method, *philosophic history*, strives to interpret history as a rational process through a priori philosophical ideas. It can be assumed that this final approach to writing history, which Hegel saw as his task, integrates the first two methods while attempting to eliminate their partialities and shortcomings in a sort of dialectical synthesis. Within world history, particulars conflict and

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68 Rotenstreich, 32.
69 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind [Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences].*, trans. William Wallace and Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), para. 549.
70 Lucia Pradella, "Hegel, Imperialism, and Universal," *Science and Society* 78, no. 4 (October 2014): 444.
71 George Dennis O'Brien, *Hegel on Reason and History: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 16.

compete with one another leading to the destruction of some in the process. However, it is from this struggle that the universal emerges.

A specific offshoot of this philosophic world history is *Spezialgeschicte* ("specialized history," or "fragmentary history," as Hartman translates it). This method is perhaps the closest to a universal view of history through the incorporation of the particular. While universal history is theoretically the complete history of the world, fragmentary history instead focuses on specific sections of history (such as the history of art or, even more specialized, the history of the art of a specific time and place) allowing for a more complete narrative to be written of a smaller piece of history that can more easily be revisited and revised, or strung together with other particular historical narratives to create a more universal and inclusive narrative.[72] The move from philosophic world history to fragmentary history demonstrates a shift from the abstract universal to the concrete universal, which, for Hegel, represents the apogee of the dialectical development of a concept.

The writing of history, as we know, is not a neutral process. Humans rely on explanatory schemes, such as frames of reference, analytical systems, and narrative traditions, to make sense of experience. This reliance is exemplified in the creation of historical narratives. As such, it is impossible to write a truly neutral and universal historical narrative, as we can never experience the world in a way in which we are unaffected by these explanatory schemes and mediating structures.[73] Indeed, the canonical historical narrative is full of partially obstructed views of the world, leading to uncertainties and insufficiencies in knowledge and the stretching of ideas in an attempt to fill in the gaps. If we accept the Euro-American historical model without examination or questioning, we run the risk of overlooking how different cultures developed their own analytical systems, tools, and conceptual frameworks.

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72 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), 8–9.
73 Thomas J. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 2–3.

Omar Acha asserts that the notion of universalism that persisted from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, which was based upon the removal of the particular, is now clearly only possible as "a product of the contradictions of the universal domination of capital."[74] According to Acha, "once the universal and the particular are dialectized by globalization, the universal is no longer only unique, but multiple." With globalism, universalism has returned as a problem, representing "an aspect of the social domination that prevails in the new global order."[75] The multitudes of accounts of history cannot be neatly combined into a single narrative track, and the typical universalist approach to history reaffirms the dominant Euro-American perspective, while neglecting or underrepresenting other narratives. Finding a compromise between the universal and the particular requires inserting particular and local histories into the dominant narrative and, in doing so, decentering and demolishing the binary of history.[76]

PHOTOGRAPHY AND UNIVERSAL/PARTICULAR HISTORIES

As with history, photography has never been a neutral mirror of the world, even while making claims of being strictly documentary. Claims referring to the universality of photography came shortly after the announcement of the medium's development, with an 1840 newspaper declaring: "it is the first universal language addressing itself to all who possess vision".[77] This notion of the inherent universality of a photograph has since resurfaced repeatedly throughout history. Pictorial, Modernist, and documentary photographers, among others, later used the medium to explore what they perceived as universal values and truths.

But this claim of universality is not unchallenged. August Sander declared in a radio lecture in the 1930s, "I believe we can say that no national language anywhere could function as

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74 Acha, "The Places of Critical Universalism," 101.

75 Acha, 105.

76 Ahmet Gürata and Louise Spence, "Introduction," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 134–35.

77 "The Daguerrolite," *The Daily Chronicle*, January 17, 1840; Quoted in Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," *Art Journal* 41, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 16.

universally as photography, or could have greater significance."[78] Sander used a chilling example

relevant to his time to demonstrate, saying:

> the newspapers are now preparing the populace for a coming bestial war in which poison gas will be used; they recommend gas masks to protect the civilian population's lives. To photograph an infant wearing a gas mask, instead of at its mother's breast, and to label the photograph as from the twentieth century, would be sufficient. The photograph would not only fix and hold fast history, but would express the whole brutal, inhuman spirit of the time in universally comprehensible form.[79]

While Sander's argument that such an image would have universally comprehensible meaning is

somewhat effective, he neglects to acknowledge the temporal and geographical particularity in the

scene he constructs.

Allan Sekula asserted that "the meaning of a photograph, like that of any other entity, is

inevitably subject to cultural definition," and declared the idea of a universal or intrinsic

significance in a photograph to be nothing but a "particularly obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore."[80]

Thus, in this view, any meaning that a photograph might have is simply a result of social attribution,

determined by the viewer's particularity. Moreover, Sekula dismissed the claim of universality as

simply a result of global domination of the hegemony in which the visual language of the dominant

cultural group is forcefully imposed upon the subordinate.[81] For Sekula, such a claim contains "the

suggestion that photography acts as a miraculous universal solvent upon the linguistic barriers

between peoples. Visual culture, having been pushed to an unprecedented level of technical

refinement, loses specificity, cultural difference is canceled, and a 'common language' prevails on a

global scale."[82] The fact that, despite the camera's ability to accurately reproduce even the smallest

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78 August Sander, "From the Nature & Growth of Photography: Lecture 5: Photography as a Universal Language," trans. Anne Halley, *The Massachusetts Review* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 676.

79 Sander, 675–76.

80 Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning (1975)," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks, 1973-1983*, The Nova Scotia Series: Source Materials of the Contemporary Arts (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 4.

81 Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs," 21.

82 Sekula, 21.

of particularities of time and place, these claims of universality remain pervasive is, for Sekula, paradoxical.[83]

Similarly, Rudolph Arnheim considered photography to be heavily tied to particularity, even when used as an attempt at expressing universality. He asserted that while painters are able to start at an abstract level and move towards particularity through addition, photographers are forced to start at straight reality and arrive at abstraction or universality only through the negation or removal of visual information.[84] Indeed, a photograph is nearly always at least partially particular, due to its necessary connection to reality and thus to a particular temporal or geographical context.

Even if the universal and the particular are both always present in photography as a medium, the balance between the two is negotiated by the photographer. As Joel Eisinger asserted, photography, especially that which aims for objectivity, allows the photographer "to capture particular truths while simultaneously transcending them to reach a level of universal truth."[85] Similarly, Jacques Rancière has suggested that the objectivity achieved in Alfred Stieglitz's photographs is achieved through the photographer's melding of the universality of form with the specific historical particularity of observation, and not simply an effect of the medium itself. According to Rancière, "the objectivity of photography is the regime of thought, perception and sensation that makes the love of pure forms coincide with the apprehension of the inexhaustible historicity found at every street corner, in every skin fold, and at every moment of time."[86]

However, when it comes to photographing the material culture of marginalized groups, there can be seen to be a persistent tendency for photographers to upset this balance, leading to the universalization or particularization of the creating culture rather than the creation of an objective

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83 Sekula, 21.

84 Rudolph Arnheim, "Splendor and Misery of the Photographer," in *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 116.

85 Joel Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation: American Criticism of Photography in the Modernist Period* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 71.

86 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 224.

image. The following case studies demonstrate the persistence of the influence of the photographer on the photographs of indigenous material culture, evident from the nineteenth century, when the medium was first developed, to the twenty-first century. It is worth noting that, while the photographers and images examined in the case studies were carefully selected based on time period and their clear demonstration of the universalizing, particularizing, or synthesizing tendencies, the selection process reflects one of the primary problems in the construction of an art historical canon. Every work of art this is included or excluded from the art historical discourse ultimately influences the overall narrative, yet some form of selection is, or course, necessary, given the vast breadth and span of the field.

In each included case study there is a tendency to capture these images in one of two ways —through either an emphasis on mysticism, seen in the discussed photographs by Augustus Le Plongeon and Man Ray. or through formal abstraction, seen in the discussed works of Timothy O'Sullivan and Edward Weston. These two approaches align with the dualism of universality and particularity. The abstraction of form lends the material cultural objects to a universal interpretation, drawing on geometry and pure form to transcend the historical particularity of what is being photographed and to communicate in what countless critics, artists, and scholars have argued to be a universal language. Conversely, the mystical approach focuses on what makes the creating cultures particular and thus different from Western culture, placing them firmly outside the standard art historical canon and inside the category of a generalized and combined "other." This visual exemplification of the dual approaches to history demonstrates the shortcomings of both and underscores the need for a synthesis of the two.

Case Study 1: August Le Plongeon's Construction of Evidence in Excavation Photography

From 1873-1885, antiquarian, photographer, and amateur archaeologist Augustus Le Plongeon, along with his wife Alice Dixon, extensively excavated and documented Maya sites in

Yucatán. The couple were pioneers in systematic photographic documentation, resulting in hundreds of images recording sites and objects in great detail and providing a valuable resource for historians, art historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists alike.

Augustus Le Plongeon[87] was methodical in his approach to photography, meticulously establishing each of his shots. Among the images he captured was a record of the 320-foot-long east facade of the so-called Governor's Palace at Uxmal, photographed in sixteen overlapping parts.[88] In his quest for accurate documentation, Le Plongeon even went so far as using ladders and scaffolding in order to achieve head-on images of architectural details, thus eliminating the distortion caused by the lens-based shortcuts used by earlier photographers. In addition to this innovative and ambitious approach to architectural photography, which resulted in the establishment of the architectural detail close-up, Le Plongeon also created several serial panoramas and stereoscopic images of ruins, and an almost 180-degree stereoscopic panorama from the top of the Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal.[89] The innovative spirit of Le Plongeon allowed him to capture the sites in an unprecedented way and with a remarkable amount of detail.

However, the accurate scientific documentation of even the most minute details that Le Plongeon strove for in his images was undermined by their inclusion in his publications arguing fantastical theories and interpretations of the material culture he photographed. Often the reproduced images would have little or no indication of location, and details were frequently shown without reference to the structures of which they were a part. Included alongside straight photographs were doctored and collaged images, which he presented as if they were unmanipulated.[90] A glaring example

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87 While it is known that Alice Dixon Le Plongeon was a photographer, amateur archaeologist, and author in her own right, her specific contributions to the work she shared with her husband have been largely forgotten to history, leaving her role in the creation of the images discussed unclear. As such, I will be discussing the images as creations of Augustus, as that is how they are credited.

88 Lawrence G. Desmond, "Of Facts and Hearsay: Bringing Augustus Le Plongeon into Focus," in *Tracing Archaeology's Past: The Historiography of Archaeology*, ed. Andrew L. Christenson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 144.

89 Desmond, 144.

90 R. Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820-1915* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 140.

Figure 1: Augustus Le Plongeon, *Queen Móo Relief,* 1881. In Desmond and Messenger*, A Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth-Century Yucatan*

Figure 2: Augustus Le Plongeon, Platform of Venus Composite print, 1883. In Desmond and Messenger, A Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth-Century Yucatan

of this is seen in Le Plongeon's heavily doctored image of a "Queen Móo" relief, [Fig. 1], in which the profile of the fictional Queen was drawn in by the photographer, leaving little of the original photographic image remaining. Le Plongeon took his manipulation even further in his representation of the Platform of Venus at Chichén Itzá, entirely fabricating the image out two separate photographs (constructing the sky and earth individually) and a line drawing as the representation of the structure itself [Fig. 2]. The platform is removed from its Mesoamerican context and placed in a barren field with dramatic clouds overhead. The manipulation creates an eerie, otherworldly landscape that works to support his unsubstantiated beliefs regarding the ancient structure and the Maya as a cultural group.

Inspired by Charles E. Brasseur de Bourbourg's 1868 theory that the New World was the birthplace and source of all civilization, Le Plongeon proposed that the Maya were survivors of a race from the mythical city of Atlantis and sought proof of this in his expeditions to ruins, often bending the evidence to corroborate his theories.[91] The amateur archaeologist spun an imaginative tale of Queen Móo. He claimed that after her husband, Chac Mool, was murdered by her brother, Queen Móo fled to the Land of Mu (which Le Plongeon argued was also the mythical city of Atlantis). However, after reaching Mu, the queen found that the civilization had vanished, so she instead journeyed on to Egypt, where she became the Egyptian Goddess Isis.[92] Le Plongeon not only believed this narrative but presented it in his writings as if it were historical fact, doctoring the evidence to support his claims. While similar views were held by fellow pseudoscientists, such as Ignatius Donnelly and James Churchward, Le Plongeon's writings were largely rejected by the scientific and professional community as eccentric and lacking evidence.

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91 Quetzil Castañeda, "Approaching Ruins: A Photo-Ethnographic Essay on the Busy Intersections of Chichén Itzá," Visual Anthropology Review 16, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2000–2001): 55, https://doi.org/10.1525/var.2000.16.2.43.
92 Evans, *Romancing the Maya*, 141.

Le Plongeon's misrepresentation of theories as fact was further exacerbated through the work of his wife, Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, who referenced his ideas as if they were verified discoveries, writing in 1902:

> Lately Dr. Le Plongeon has discovered, in translating the inscriptions, written in Maya Language with Egyptian and Maya characters, which adorn the faces of the Pyramid of Xochicalco… that said pyramid was a commemorative monument raised to perpetuate the memory of the destruction of the land of Mu among coming generations, and that it was made an exact model of the sacred hill in Atlantis which Plato in his Timœus describes as having been crowned by a temple dedicated to Cleito and Poseidon.[93]

Despite the lack of reliable scientific, archaeological, or empirical evidence found to support Le Plongeon's ideas regarding the origins of the Maya, his wife recounted his beliefs as if they were fact, heralding them as a discovery rather than just a theory. While Le Plongeon's story was fabricated fiction, based primarily on weak linguistic evidence and erroneous natural history, the photographic evidence that he manipulated into existence attempted to skew the opinions of the public to consider the Maya as mystical beings. He fiercely defended his theories of Maya cultural diffusion, continuing to publish and lecture on them even after subsequent explorations discredited him and scholars and critics began increasingly rejecting his claims as "very scanty and conjectural, and… utterly valueless,"[94] and "the workings of a heated brain."[95]

As Quetzil Castañeda argues, such a consideration of the Maya causes the very name to become void of any cultural or ethnographic substance, ultimately making it no more than a "sign or mantra and transcendental signifier."[96] Not only did Le Plongeon strip all context from the word, as well as the work he was photographing, but he encouraged the future practice of doing so. Le Plongeon's mystical-religious explanation inspired twentieth-century interpreters such as José Argüelles to develop related ideas and ultimately argue that the Maya were super-spiritual extra-

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93 Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, *Queen Moo's Talisman: The Fall of the Maya Empire* (New York: Peter Eckler Publisher, 1902), xv.
94 "Contemporary Records: III. General Literaure," in *Contemporary Review*, vol. 50 (London: Isbister and Company, 1886), 758.
95 *The Critic*, vol. 2 (New York: The Critic Company, 1884), 302.
96 Castañeda, "Approaching Ruins," 55.

terrestrial beings and that Atlantis was a stopping point of these beings on their way to and from Yucatán.[97]

As a result of his drive to produce proof, Le Plongeon's images were heavily distorted with the intent of supporting constructed fantastical narratives. Through his obsession with his questionable theories of Queen Móo and the Land of Mu, Le Plongeon presented the ancient civilization whose ruins he was excavating as a magical and mystical society based in fantasy. In doing so, he demonstrated one of the perils of particularism. By focusing entirely on a false particularity, Le Plongeon reinforced the divide between "West" and the "Rest" or "Us" and "Them," and encouraged the viewing of differing cultures as part of a conglomerate "Other" based around the typical white, European/American male standard.

Case Study 2: Timothy O'Sullivan's Photographs of Ruins from the Wheeler Survey

In 1871, Timothy H. O'Sullivan joined the Wheeler Survey, a geological survey of the area to the west of the 100th meridian, as chief photographer. The mission of the survey was to chart the settling of the American West through topographic and scientific research, cartography, and the recording of information on natural resources and terrain. Published primarily in the context of a series of large albums reporting the findings of the Wheeler Survey, the photography of O'Sullivan was initially considered as just another documentary element in a collection of maps, topographical and meteorological records, sketches, and journals.

Despite this goal of fact-recording, however, the images captured by O'Sullivan cannot be considered as merely straightforward recordings of information. Rick Dingus discovered, through his effort to re-photograph a selection of expeditionary photographs taken in the American West, that O'Sullivan made choices as a photographer that affected their status as documents. Dingus found that O'Sullivan frequently utilized a wide-angle lens and would, on occasion, make the great

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97 Castañeda, 55.

effort to tilt his heavy, wet-plate camera to achieve a more visually pleasing composition in his photographs. As a result of these decisions made by the photographer, the perspective and proportions of what O'Sullivan photographed were distorted.[98] While still concerned with recording, O'Sullivan's photographs indicate a consideration of artistic elements that moves them away from the realm of mere documentation.

This concern with aesthetics and form, while perhaps most evident in his photographs of natural geographical features, can also be seen in his works featuring human-made structures. In *Characteristic Ruin, of the Pueblo San Juan, New Mexico, on the North Bank of the San Juan River,* (1874) [Fig. 3], there is a discernible compression of depth and distance, and an emphasis on texture and shadow achieved through high contrast. The ruins of a Puebloan structure emerge from the flattened, rocky earth in the background. The surfaces of the ruins and earth run together and create a single mass of volume in the foreground, set before an empty sky which serves to emphasize the graphic quality of the image. While a human figure appears in the image, serving as a reference for scale as was common practice in archaeological photography, he is hidden in shadow rather than being immediately apparent in order to convey the structure's size quickly. When compared to a second photograph of ruins, from John Wesley Powell's second expedition through the Grand Canyon via the Colorado River in 1871 [Fig. 4], O'Sullivan's compression of space and emphasis on flatness becomes apparent. While the image from the Powell expedition conveys the three-dimensionality and varying textures of the ruins, O'Sullivan's image presents the ruins as a flattened mass parallel to the picture plane, causing the photograph to lean more towards formal abstraction than typical archaeological field photography.

Once removed from its original place in a collection of survey data and shifted into the domain of art, it becomes easier to see O'Sullivan's movement toward formal abstraction. *Ancient*

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98 Rick Dingus, *The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy O'Sullivan* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

Figure 4: Timothy O'Sullivan, *Characteristic Ruin, of the Pueblo San Juan, New Mexico, on the North Bank of the San Juan River,* 1874. Albumen Silver Print.

Figure 5: View of Hano, One of the Seven Pueblos of Tusayan, ca 1871. Image from J.W. Powell, *The Grand Canyon Expedition: the Exploration of the Colorado River and its Canyons (*Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2019)
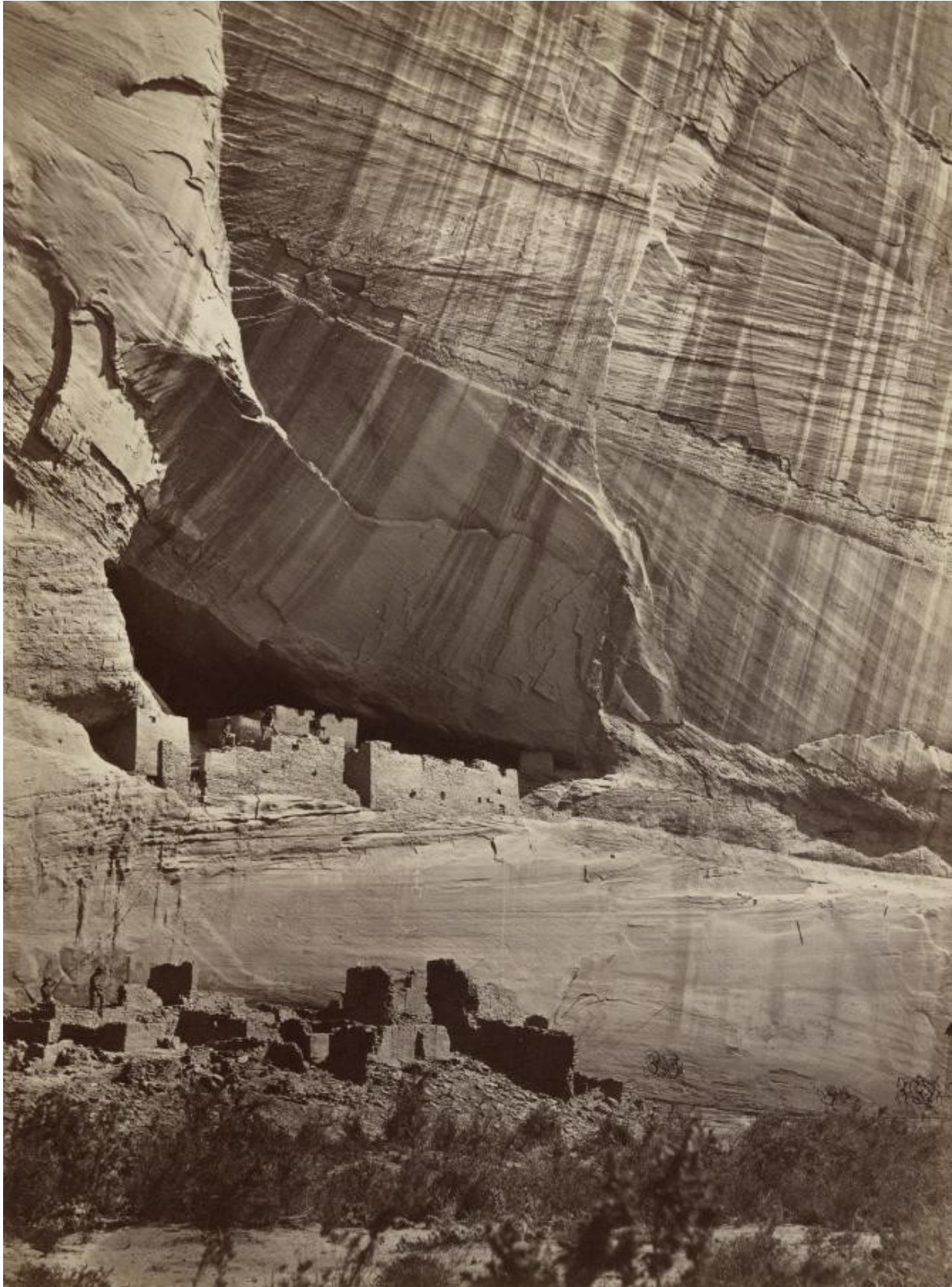
Figure 3: Timothy O'Sullivan, *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, In a Niche Fifty Feet Above Present Cañon Bed,* 1873. Albumen Silver Print, 27.6×19.2 cm.

Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, N.M. in a niche 50 feet above present canon bed [Fig. 5], captured in

1873, was included in the Museum of Modern Art's 1937 exhibition, *Photography 1839–1937*.

When Beaumont Newhall brought survey photography into the museum collection, he declared the

work of O'Sullivan as a forerunner of modernism.[99] The photograph's stark geometric forms,

dramatic contrast of values, and reduction of volumes to crisp graphic planes indeed align with what

would come to be known as a modernist sensibility. The ruins of an ancient Puebloan architectural

structure (commonly referred to as the White House Ruins) appear tucked into an indentation above

a cliff. The ruins themselves are dwarfed by the monumental expanse of rock, making the human

cultural element of the photograph secondary to the geological. Sweeping lines on the rock, created

by iron and manganese oxide deposits, create a sense of texture while highlighting the flatness of

the surface. These lines are echoed in curved ropes connecting the ruins in the niche to those lying

below. The contrast of light and shadow compresses the volumes into planes, and the image

becomes more an abstraction of reality into flat forms than the documentation of a three-

dimensional space. The inclusion of humans allows for the monumental scale of the cliff and rock

face to be experienced, but they are mostly hidden in the shadows, causing them to be lost in the

overall composition; as with *Characteristic Ruin*, while human figures are present for those looking

for information, they are not central to the photograph. Furthermore, the depiction of the survey

inprogress through the incorporation of the human figures, ropes, and equipment conveys a

narrative of conquest, reiterating the connection between colonialism and the universality hinted at

through the use of form and space.

The image, however, does little to convey the significance of the site itself. One of North

America's longest continuously inhabited areas, Canyon de Chelly has been home to native groups

dating back 2,500 to 5,000 years and is riddled with ruins, artifacts, and stone etchings telling their

99 Robin E. Kelsey, "Viewing the Archive: Timothy O'Sullivan's Photographs for the Wheeler Survey 1871-74," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 4 (December 2003): 702.

histories.[100] Around 200–100 BCE, the canyon became home to a semi-agricultural tribe, referred to

by archaeologists as "Basketmakers," ancestors to the Ancestral Puebloan peoples,[101] that settled in

the cliffs. Even today, hundreds of Ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings, as well as extensive

petroglyphs and petrographs, can be found spread throughout the system of canyons. The Diné[102]

later adopted the canyon as their homeland and utilized the existing buildings left by their

predecessors, even incorporating them into their own traditions and beliefs. The White House, for

instance, is to the Diné the Home of Talking God and is used as the site where the Holy People

initiate youths in a healing ceremony known as the Night Way.[103] The settlement lies within the

boundary of the four sacred mountains delineating Dinétah, the traditional homeland of the Diné

people. According to Diné Bahane' (The Diné creation story), the creator and the Holy People

placed the Diné on Dinétah, and the Diné people thus have a deep spiritual connection to the region,

which encompasses portions of what is now Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona.[104]

Canyon de Chelly played a prominent role in the history of relations between the Diné and

Americans as well. Less than a decade before O'Sullivan came through the canyon with the Wheeler

survey, General James Carleton and Kit Carson invaded the canyon in 1864 with more than four

hundred soldiers, destroying hogans, slaughtering livestock, and burning orchards and crops. The

Diné that surrendered to avoid starvation were later forced to embark on the first of many death

marches to an internment camp at Bosque Redondo, which have come to be known collectively as

the Long Walk. When the U.S. government realized that their attempts to establish the camp as a

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100 Tara Travis, "Captured in Stone: Women in the Rock Art of Canyon de Chelly," *OAH Magazine of History* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 14–15.

101 Although contemporary scholars and historians commonly refer to the Ancestral Puebloans as Anasazi, this was the name given to the group by the Diné. Anasazi can be translated to mean "ancient enemies" or "enemy ancestors" as well as the more neutral "ancient ones." Because of this potential negative connotation, contemporary Puebloans prefer Ancestral Puebloans to Anasazi.

102 The name Diné is the original name of the group the Spanish referred to as "the Apaches of Navajo" or "Navajo." While the name Navajo is more commonplace and recognizable, I will be referring to the group using the name they use for themselves.

103 Raphaëlle Rolland, "Out of the Shadows: Navajos of Canyon de Chelly National Monument (AZ)" (Dissertation, Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, N.D.), 226.

104 Judy A. Martin, "Significant Traditional Cultural Properties of the Navajo People," Traditional Culture Program (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department, 2013), 8.

reservation for Native Americans were unsuccessful and their plan unsalvageable, the Treaty of

Bosque Redondo was signed in 1868. The treaty declared Canyon de Chelly reserved strictly for

Diné use, allowing them to return to a small portion of their sacred homeland, provided they

continued to meet certain conditions set by the United States government.

The history and significance of Canyon de Chelly would have been in recent memory to

O'Sullivan and his fellow members of the Wheeler survey. Despite, or perhaps because of this

knowledge, O'Sullivan's photograph fails to capture the specific history of the area. Instead, the

tones, values, and framing of the image shift the photograph towards abstraction, through which

O'Sullivan seems to be striving for an element of the universal. However, this is achieved at the

expense of omitting the particulars of the structures and ruins. At the time when O'Sullivan captured

this iconic photograph, it was only the second of two cliff-dwellings of note that had been

documented in the American Southwest,[105] but O'Sullivan chose to only minimally record the ruins,

leaning more towards a concern for form than for visually documenting the region. However, it is

important to note that O'Sullivan did make efforts to photograph Indigenous groups and their

cultures throughout the survey, so this trend towards universalism should not be interpreted as

evidence of a disregard for particular cultures, but rather as an apparent interest in something that

could transcend difference.

<u>Case Study 3: Man Ray's Photographs of Masks and Figures from Colonized Lands</u>

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the increased interest in African culture

throughout the western world led to the publishing of catalogs in which photographs of non-Western

objects were reproduced for distribution. Although these photographs started as allegedly

straightforward documentary images, as the people of the Occident and avant-garde artists began

embracing non-Western art, a new generation of photographers surfaced who broke away from

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105 The first being Two-Story Cliff House in Mesa Verde, CO, photographed by William Henry Jackson in 1874.

conventional ethnographic or anthropological approaches of representing non-Western sculpture and translated them into their own art.

Perhaps one of the twentieth-century's most prolific creators of photographs of objects from the colonized regions, Man Ray produced an extensive collection of works that reflects the influence of indigenous art on twentieth-century Modernist artists and demonstrates to the significant role photography played in the collection, dissemination, and reception of non-Western art.[106] Breaking from the conventional photographic practice of representing (primarily western) sculpture through straight-on views against neutral airbrushed backgrounds and with minimal shadows, Man Ray's approach to photographing these objects transforms them from ordinary objects into quasi-magical things, invested with mystic and psychic power.[107]

Perhaps the most famous of these images, *Noire et blanche* [Fig. 6], initially published in the May 1926 issue of *Vogue*, has become a modernist icon. Man Ray juxtaposed the whitened, made-up face of famous artist's model Kiki of Montparnasse with the darkly stained, finely carved, and highly stylized Baule-style mask from the Ivory Coast. The disembodied head of the model, reduced visually to a mask of a woman (or the symbolic mask of women), creates a visual companion to the African mask that manages to be its formal opposite while at the same time drawing visual similarities between the two masks of members of the particular "other."

Seldom seen, however, is the first image of the set captured of this mask [Fig. 7] — often dismissed as simply a study for *Noire et Blanche*, and thus considered to be of little artistic interest. When compared to the anonymously produced photographs of masks and objects in catalogs at the time, it becomes apparent that this is no mere study. The image is carefully composed and deliberately lit to create the interplay of light and shadow across the mask's surface. The right side of the mask almost seems to dematerialize in the highlight of the bold lighting on the polished surface of

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106 Wendy A. Grossman and Letty Bonnell, "Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens," *African Arts*, Ephemeral Arts I, 42, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 72.
107 Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 27.

Figure 6: Man Ray, *Noire et Blanche,* 1926. Gelatin silver print. © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris
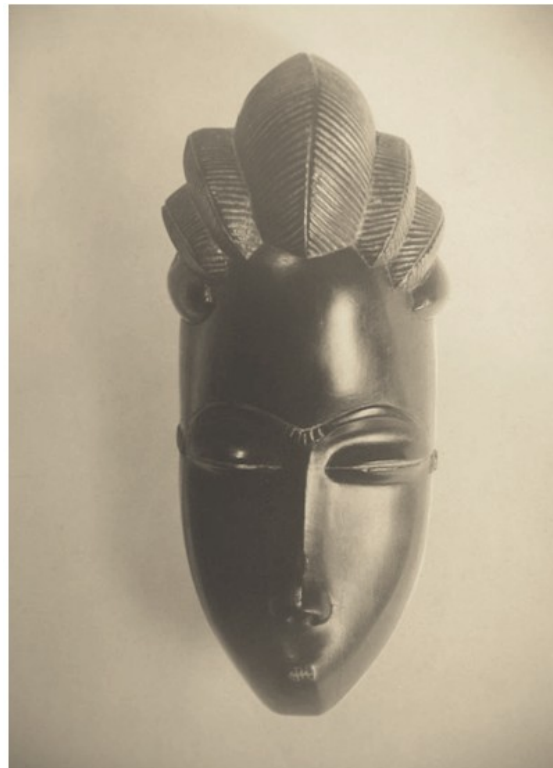

Figure 7: Man Ray, *Untitled (mask featured in Noire et blanche),* 1926. Gelatin silver print. © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

the mask, while the left retreats into darkness, lending the object an ephemeral and mystical aura and imbuing it with a sense of animation. The image does not convey to the viewer any cultural background for the object, such as that the mask would have been intended for use in Baule masquerade ceremonies to honor the woman it depicted.[108] It is instead an anonymous object lifted from its historical and cultural context and significance and relocated in the realm of mysticism and fabricated myth for strictly aesthetic purposes.

A few months prior to the publication of the iconic *Noire et blanche*, a collection of Man Ray's photographs of objects from Oceania was published in the catalog for *Tableaux de Man Ray et Objets des Iles,* the opening exhibition of the Galerie Surrealiste in Paris. The front and back cover of the catalog featured photographs by Man Ray of two different objects from the exhibition: a male ancestor spirit figure (adu zatua) from the Ohno Niha people of the Indonesian island of Nias, and a mask from the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea, both from the collection of André Breton.[109] The first image, *La lune brille sur l'ile Nias* [Fig. 8], shows the ancestor spirit figure in a fabricated, ethereal landscape. There is an air of otherworldliness and mysticism, epitomizing the ideals of the Surrealist movement. In its paired image, an untitled photograph of the Sepik River region mask [Fig. 9], Man Ray utilized intense, low-key lighting to give the illusion that the mask is emerging from darkness and emitting a moonlike glow. One eye is cast into shadow, giving the mask a sense of sinister, yet still fanciful, animation. Again Man Ray focused on the particularity of the artifacts by placing them within a constructed mythical context.

A later photograph of what was believed to be a carved Aztec birthing figure, commonly identified as the Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl [Fig. 10], further demonstrates Man Ray's projection of a magical, sentient essence onto an inanimate object.[110] While it has since been widely accepted that

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108 Wendy A. Grossman and Steven Manford, "Unmasking Man Ray's Noire et Blanche," *American Art* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 136.
109 Grossman and Manford, 311.
110 Wendy A. Grossman, "Man Ray's Lost and Found Photographs: Arts of the Americas in Context," *Journal of Surrealism of the Americas* 2, no. 1 (2008): 114.

Figure 8:Man Ray, *La lune brille sur l'île Nias,* 1926. Gelatin silver print. © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Figure 9: Man Ray, *Untitled,* 1926. Gelatin silver print. © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Figure 10: Man Ray, *Untitled (Aztec figurine of the goddess Tlazoteotl),* ca 1930, Gelatin silver print © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Figure 11: Man Ray, *Untitled (Aztec figurine of the goddess Tlazoteotl),* ca 1930, Photomontage of gelatin silver prints. © 2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

this specific birthing figure is not an authentic Aztec carving but instead a nineteenth-century forgery, at the time, it was believed to be an icon of the Earth deity of fertility created by the Aztecs for a religious purpose. The statuette, with the seemingly deformed being the goddess is birthing, along with the contrast and tension between the anguish hinted at by the goddess's contorted face and toothy grimace and the calm gaze of her eyes, thoroughly embodied the Surrealist's preoccupation with dualism and the grotesque. The perceived exotic nature of the objects was emphasized by the photographer's use of dramatic lighting, changing perspectives, relatively tight framing, and perhaps most notably his use of a short focal length lens, promoting slight distortion in the object while emphasizing the expressive quality of the face. These photographic choices lend the images an almost cinematic quality, which is enhanced by the rotation suggested by the sequence of the images chosen for the photomontage [Fig. 11]. While the construction of a new mythic and mystical context for the object is not as blatant as in other works of his, such as *La lune brille sur l'ile Nias*, Man Ray removed the statuette from its believed historical context and steeped the figure with distortion, expression, and movement. In doing so, the artist deconstructed the object's history, presenting it not as an ancient artifact, but as if it were a modern form with elements of magic and the surreal.

A few years later, in 1933, Man Ray photographed a female figure from the Bangwa kingdom of Cameroon [Fig. 12]. The figure was highly esteemed by the Surrealists for its unusual dynamic pose, asymmetrical composition, and roughly textured surface which stood in contrast to the qualities typically preferred in African Art at the time.[111] Man Ray melodramatically lit the figure and captured it from an oblique, high camera angle, not at all characteristic of conventional art object or artifact photography. The result is the infusing of the sculpture with life, achieved through the interaction of light and shadows across its body and base. The theatrical use of space and high angle of the photograph further emphasize this liveliness, creating an illusion that the object is suspended in

111 Wendy A. Grossman, "From Ethnographic Object to Modernist Icon: Photographs of African and Oceanic Sculpture and the Rhetoric of the Image," *Visual Resources* 23, no. 4 (December 2007): 315, https://doi.org/10.1080/01973760701666398.
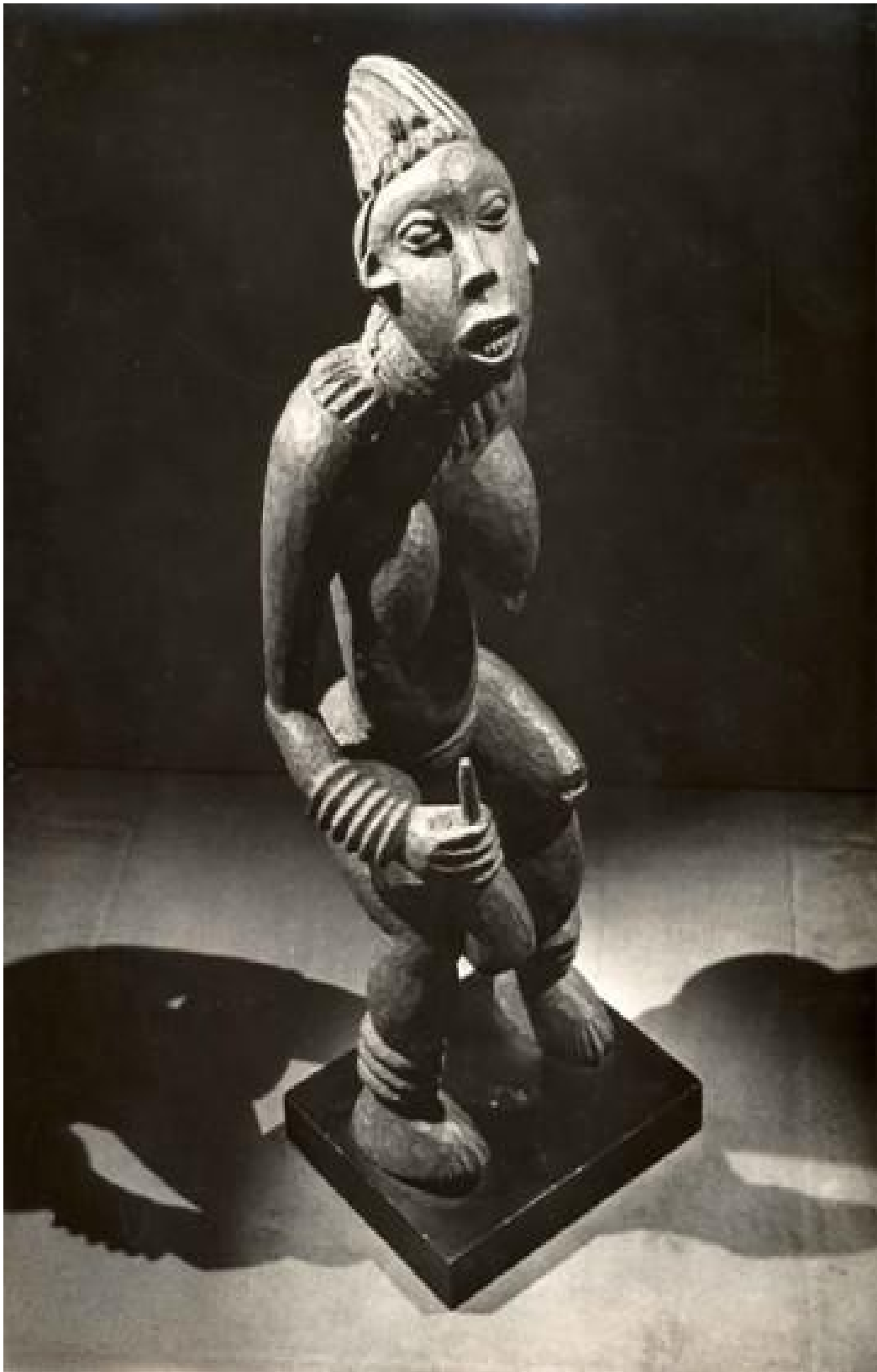
Figure 12: Man Ray, *Untitled (Bangwa Queen),* c. 1933, Gelatin silver print. ©
2008 Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

motion while highlighting the expressive face of the figure. Yet again, the object is removed from its context and injected with life, perpetuating an aura of myth and magic.

While the avant-garde embraced non-Western cultures, they did so only to enhance their bohemian outcast reputations through the exploration of the unfamiliar, which was regularly accomplished at the expense of the particular.[112] The importance the group placed on concepts such as primal forces, magic, and mysticism led them to embrace objects from colonized regions, such as the South Seas and Africa. Such objects not only challenged the hierarchies of Western art history but offered a distinct magical allure, which the artists then attempted to capture through their own creative undertakings. Forcing the viewer to consider them through the Surrealist lens, the objects are conferred a venerational status not only as objects of art, but as totems and ritual objects brimming with spiritual, mystical, and magical qualities.

The images Man Ray produced presented new ways of viewing and understanding such objects, aiding in their transfiguration from "primitive" artifact to what was accepted by the western world as "Art."[113] However, much like Le Plongeon, Man Ray fabricated a false mysticism around the objects he was photographing. This focus on cultural "otherness," accomplished through the construction of mystical and magical contexts for these objects, exaggerates difference to the point where it becomes a vital component of the way these images are understood. Their appeal comes from their emphasis on the false particularity Man Ray created through his fascination with the combined and generalized "other." The objects are depicted as mystical fetishes, while the intentional and direct comparison of modern western culture with foreign cultures had an "othering" effect that not only emphasized difference but made it into something that could be imitated to serve the desires of a European public.

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112 Petrine Archer-Straw, "Exoticism in Black and White," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 21 (Fall 2007): 29–30.
113 Grossman, "Man Ray's Lost and Found Photographs," 116–17.

Case Study 4: Edward Weston's Modernist Approach to Ruins and Craft in Mexico

Towering over Teotihuacan and mirroring the natural lines of Cerro Gordo in the distance, the Pyramid of the Sun remains a national symbol of the indigenous cultural history of Mexico. First excavated by Leopoldo Batres in 1906, the pyramid has remained a fixture in European and American imagination for over a century.[114] While the original function of the structure is still unknown, lost to history, scholars have long agreed that the Sun Pyramid played an essential role in the social and political lives of Teotihuacan. Due to its association with the Storm God, as well as time and celestial bodies, it is probable that the pyramid's platform was the site of New Fire ceremonies, which occurred at the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, as well as on occasions such as the founding of new cities or temples or the investiture of new authority figures.[115] Thus, the Pyramid of the Sun was a place of not only pilgrimage, but of rebirth and new beginnings as well.[116] Whatever the purpose, the idea that this massive monument played an integral role in Teotihuacan society is never contested. However, Edward Weston eliminated all particular elements of the site through his use of universalizing abstraction.

In 1923, Weston captured an image of the Pyramid of the Sun at sundown [Fig. 13] that decontextualizes the ancient structure entirely. The framing of the image eliminates the viewer's sense of scale, and Weston's manipulation of light and shadow obscures much of the detail of the pyramid. While the trees in the foreground hint at the considerable size of the structure, their detail and texture are lost against the stones of the pyramid as they blend to form a single mass that seems to float in

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114 N. Sugiyama, S. Sugiyama, and A. Sarabia, "Inside the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan, Mexico: 2008-2011 Excavation in Preliminary Results," *Latin American Antiquity* 24, no. 4 (December 2013): 403.

115 Anthony F. Aveni, "Out of Teotihuacan: Origins of the Celestial Canon in Mesoamerica," in *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, ed. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 253–68; R. Sload, "Radiocarbon Dating of Teotihuacan Mapping Project TE28 Material from the Cave Under the Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacan, Mexico," Report to FAMSI (Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies Inc., 2007); René F. Millon, "The Place Where Time Began: An Archaeologist's Interpretation of What Happened in Teotihuacan History," in *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*, ed. Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory (San Francisco: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 16–43.

116 William Leonard Fash, A. Tokovinine, and Barbara W. Fash, "The House of New Fire at Teotihuacan and Its Legacy in Mesoamerica," in *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, ed. William Leonard Fash and Leonardo López Luján (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009), 213.

Figure 13: Edward Weston, *Piramide del Sol (Pyramid of the Sun),* 1922. Gelatin silver print. 19.21×24.13cm.

Figure 14: Edward Weston, *Pirámide del Sol, Mexico,* 1923. Gelatin silver print. 19.21 cm x 24.13 cm

space. The volumes are flattened into planes and strong diagonals, erasing the history and cultural significance of the site and reducing the monumental ruins of the pyramid to pure geometric elements. The framing of the image further collapses the distinction between material things and abstraction, as substance and shadow dissolve into a flat form. A second photograph of the pyramid [Fig. 14] achieves a similar effect. Taken at a steep angle at the base of the pyramid looking up, this photograph condenses the pyramid to a pair of triangular forms against a dark sky. The even light on the pyramid eliminates nearly all shadows, reducing the depth and again flattening the three-dimensional forms into simple planes. The bottom portion of the structure appears to tilt toward the viewer, nearly parallel to the picture frame, further diminishing the depth of the image and aiding in the illusion.

The following year, Weston visited the Piramide de Cuernavaca at Teopanzolco and captured an image that further demonstrates his tendency towards geometric and formal abstraction in the photographing of an ancient structure [Fig. 15]. Rediscovered in 1910 and first excavated in 1921, the site contains numerous temples and is believed to be a spiritual or ceremonial center for the society that built it.[117] However, Weston disregarded the significance of the site in favor of universalizing the structure in his photograph. The steps and shadows are transformed into a series of lines of alternating values that tip towards the viewer, working to flatten the visual field, while the walls surrounding the stairs are pushed towards the background into a single mass.

A similar approach is seen in the 1926 photograph *Tres ollas de Oaxaca (Three Ollas of Oaxaca)* [Fig. 16]. Weston composed and photographed a group of three ceramic vessels against the stark background of the roof of his Mexico City apartment. Again, the image provides no sense of the scale of the objects within it and limited detail is provided, resulting in a flattening of the forms into shadows. The three individual ollas become a single dark mass situated in the middle of a flat grey

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117 Leo Cabranes-Grant, *From Scenarios to Networks: Performing the Intercultural in Colonial Mexico* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

Figure 15: Edward Weston, *Pirámide de Cuernavaca with Two Landings,* 1924. Gelatin silver print. 19.21 cm x 24.13 cm

Figure 16: Edward Weston, *Tres Ollas de Oaxaca (Three Ollas of Oaxaca),* 1926.Gelatin Silver Print, 19×23.9 cm

background. As with his photographs of pyramids, Weston removed all context surrounding the ollas. While Olivier Debroise notes that Weston "marveled at the fact that the pots had been manufactured in the same way for centuries, with a round bottom so that they could sit on the earth and blend with it,"[118] there is little interest shown in the history, use, or ornament of the vessels. Instead, Weston focused on deconstructing their volumes, abstracting them from their historical and cultural context and universalizing them as pure geometric forms.

Weston utilized geometric form in these photographs of indigenous material culture in an attempt to render the content translatable to a broad audience. Andrew Ginger suggests that geometry is a universal photographic language, providing a tool that enables the viewer to understand images through recognizable forms that provide a "sense of communion."[119] Such use of geometry not only visually orders and organizes an image, but also provides meaning while emphasizing the artistic agency of the photographer.[120] Photographing scenes and structures in a way that emphasizes geometric shapes "takes what is local and specific to a place or time and makes its forms comprehensible to anyone anywhere who is versed in the language of the engineer."[121] Thus, this lean towards formalism is perhaps the closest we can come to a universal language with the ability to communicate the shape and forms of particulars without being dependent on any specific cultural contexts or conditions, effectively translating the real world into a theoretically universal geometric language. Ginger claims that the act of geometrically rendering a scene eliminates the partitions between different cultures, geographic locations, and even periods in time, bridging the divide between particulars.

118 Olivier Debroise, "Gerardo Suter: Primary Machines," in *Labyrinth of Memory*, ed. Joseph R. Wolin (New York: The Americas Society, 1999), 22.
119 Andrew Ginger, "Universal Language and Cultural Translation in Nineteenth-Century Photography and Geometry," *History of Photography* 36, no. 4 (2012): 396.
120 David Davies, "How Photographs 'Signify': Cartier-Bresson's 'Reply' to Scruton," in *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature*, ed. Scott Walden (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 390.
121 Ginger, "Universal Language and Cultural Translation," 390.

Weston embraced the idea of the universal and acknowledged that it played an important role in his photographic process. In a 1937 letter to Henry Allen Moe at the Guggenheim Foundation, Weston wrote: "my work-purpose, my theme, can most clearly be stated as the recognition, recording, and presentation of the interdependence, the relativity of all things — the universality of basic form… In a blossoming fruit tree, a cloud, a smokestack; each of these being only a part of the whole, but each — in itself— becoming a symbol of the whole, of life."[122] Indeed, Weston's work speaks more about his views on universality rather than particular or local circumstances. Weston's approach deconstructs the history and meaning of the structures, breaking down the original forms and reconstructing them as simplified and clean forms in a modernist context. There is no visual indication of concern for the history, use, or significance of the sites, nor is there any trace of any exoticism or fetishization of the particular object in these photographs. Instead, Weston practiced a Modernist exploration of forms, systematically reducing volumes and objects steeped in history and associations into pure geometry in line with the hyper-formalism of modernism and the avant-garde.[123]

Through this formalist geometric abstraction, Weston eliminates the specific histories of the sites and objects photographed, replacing them with an appeal to the perceived universal value of human reasoning. However, while this universalizing of forms strives for a unifying element within all of humankind, it also suggests an enforcing of the Eurocentric version of the universal through its elimination of all traces of specific culture, which is reinforced by the abstraction of Mesoamerican material culture being performed by an American.

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122 Quoted in Lew Andrews, *Weston & Charlot: Art & Friendship* (Lincoln [Neb.]: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 141.
123 Debroise, "Gerardo Suter: Primary Machines," 22.

RECONCILING THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR

Since the late 1970s, post-colonialists and postmodernists have struggled to determine a balanced relationship between the particular (the local) and the universal (the global) and to ultimately find a way to reconcile the two concepts. As the photographers discussed in the final two case studies of this paper attempt to achieve the same ends, I pause now to discuss the theory of this attempted synthesis.

The opposing approaches of universalism and particularism are both faulty. While particularism focuses on the unique experiences and values of a group, it also promotes a process of constructing identity based solely on difference. However, the very idea of "difference" cannot exist without some concept of the universal or an ideal identity. This construction of difference is repeatedly seen throughout history, as colonized subjects function as the intrinsic "other" to the western imperial self, only being permitted to act, behave, and be viewed as "fragmented selves," qualified by their particularity.[124]

Similarly complicated, universalism aims to find commonalities between all of humankind, but in doing so obliterates difference and invalidates cultural identities in favor of the dominant culture in a form of cultural imperialism. Forcing a false universal onto the groups it excludes is essentially obligatory assimilation. Paula Moya examined the effects of assimilation on Chicanx individuals, noting that success in the Chicanx community is typically dependent on their assimilation into dominant white American culture, through the adoption of the same language, social codes, and other cultural elements. This rejection of roots to join the false universal has economic and social benefits, but can also have damaging effects on an individual, resulting in a loss of "moral and epistemic possibility" due to "predetermined cultural homogeneity."[125] When incorporated into the dominant culture, particular viewpoints and approaches to art, problem-

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124 Narcisa Paredes-Canilao, "Decolonising Subjects from the Discourse of Difference," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* I, no. I (2006): 8.
125 Moya, *Learning from Experience*, 127.

solving, and social arrangements can help a society to better flourish.[126] Universalism threatens to eliminate these differing viewpoints and approaches, limiting the potential of society through homogenization.

For Hegel, the universal-particular-singular relationship comprises a triangular structure within which there is a near-constant interaction and interdependence between the universal and the particular. The very idea of the universal develops from an absence within the particular. As Rousseau noted, it is only through the existence of different societies that we are able to conceive of "the great one."[127] Our ideal of a universal culture is established by our own particular culture. In other words, it would be difficult for any group to conceive of a society in a manner that does not use their own political, social, and cultural context as its point of reference. Furthermore, it is impossible for a group to affirm its particular identity without first referring to the identities of the group or groups from which it seeks to set itself apart.[128] As Hegel observed, the universal comes out of the struggle of the particular: "[i]t is the particular which fights each other to exhaustion, and a part of which is ruined. But it is precisely from the struggle, from the fall of the particular, that the universal results."[129] Without the particular that defines it, there can be no universal either. As Žižek describes it: "universality…is always rooted, like an umbilical cord, in a particular content….the very *form* of universality emerges through radical dislocation, through some more radical impossibility or 'primordial repression.'"[130] To put it another way, universalism and particularism are not two discrete and opposed ideas but have to be considered as two distinct processes

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126 Moya, 127.

127 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: Everyman Library, 1973), 175.

128 Rousseau, 133.

129 Hegel, *Reason in History*, 105.

130 Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 109–10.

(universalizing and particularizing) that work together to shape a hegemonic totality.[131] Thus, it is impossible to have one without the other.

This complicated relationship presents a stumbling block not only to attempts to instill one while eliminating the other, but also to any attempts to reconcile the two opposites as an approach to writing and developing art history. If universality and particularity are necessarily intertwined, yet both present issues, the problem becomes finding a way to negotiate and synthesize the opposing ideals of universality and particularity—to find a point of reconciliation between the two. The two ideas that seem to be the most feasible are that of *cultural translation* across *competing universalities*, as presented by Butler, and the notion of *concrete universality,* as suggested by Hegel.

CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND COMPETING UNIVERSALS

Any idea of the universal will always be necessarily tainted by the cultural norms that it claims to extend across. Butler argues that although there have been multiple attempts to define universals, it is impossible to know whether the "scope has been decided once and for all." It may be that the universal is only partially articulated for a specific group.[132] It is through challenging, questioning, and examining what we consider to be the universal that we are able to develop it into a more complete universal. The very idea of the universal necessitates "a relation of exchange and a task of translation" across cultural lines.[133] Cultural translation entails the translating of values, behavior, thinking patterns, ethics, and other aspects of culture from one cultural context into another. It can also be interpreted as a means of navigating "cultural clash, collision, or conflict," a

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131 Ernesto Laclau, "Constructing Universality," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 301–2.
132 Judith Butler, "Universality in Culture," in *For Love of Country?*, by Martha Craven Nussbaum, ed. Joshua Cohen, New Democracy Forum (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 46.
133 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 24–25.

way of attempting to resolve the issue at various levels — that of the individual, a small subgroup, or an entire culture.[134]

Stuart Hall explains the term *translation* as "a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualization, without any notion of a primary origin."[135] According to Hall, whenever something such as a concept, experience, or object enters into a new cultural space, it is necessarily changed through a process of disarticulation and subsequent re-articulation. Cultural translation should not be considered in the traditional sense of the word, but more in the sense of reworking, transcoding, or *transculturation.* Some elements of the original may remain unchanged, as there will always be certain concepts or forms in common, but new elements will have been added during the shift.

The notion of cultural translation (referring both to the idea of translating meaning from one cultural-linguistic group to another as well as to the effect on meaning caused by the moving of cultural objects and texts between cultural contexts) has become a key concern in recent years in intercultural research. This shift is possibly due to the increasingly visible effects globalization has had on societies since the end of the Cold War.[136] It differs from cultural *transfer* in that transfer suggests that what is being passed along remains unchanged. Cultural translation does not mean merely transferring an established idea from one cultural vocabulary to another unaltered but instead requires that the dominant discourse change through the admittance and incorporation of foreign concepts, deconstructing and then reconstructing existing categories.[137] It is distinctly different from the idea of cultural hybridity, which is often critiqued for its not allowing space for human agency. Instead, *translation*, much like *appropriation*, emphasizes individual or collective action.

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134 Peter Burke, "Gilberto Freyre, Hybridity and Cultural Translation," *Portuguese Studies* 27, no. 1 (2011): 76.
135 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen," in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 393 f.
136 Paul Gladston, "Contemporary Chinese Visual Culture and Cultural Translation," *Modern China Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3.
137 Lloyd, "(Women's) Human Rights," 97.

For Butler, translation is the process "by which the repudiated within universality is readmitted into the term in the process of remaking it."[138]This is only achieved through the contamination of the universal through an exposure to difference, which will unavoidably prompt some level of social transformation.[139] Butler suggests a universality through cultural translation; since the idea of the universal is not the same from culture to culture, it necessitates such a translation. As she notes:

> no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation. Without translation, the very concept of universality cannot cross the linguistic borders it claims, in principle, to be able to cross… without translation, the only way the assertion of universality can cross a border is through a colonial and expansionist logic.[140]

According to Butler, in order for universality to enact itself, it must first endure a repeated translations into assorted cultural contexts.[141] If a universal is unable to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries through cultural translation, then it will, out of necessity, tend to operate according to colonial and imperial logic through its imposing of dominant values and views on marginalized groups. One of the social and political aims of Butler's view is, therefore, to establish "*practices of translation"* between differing or competing universals.[142] In order for such a project of translation to achieve social or political practices of translation, it must complete a "movement of competing and overlapping universalisms."[143]

In Butler's view, in Hegel's universal-particular binary the formal concept of universality (abstract universality, or a universality which fails to embrace all particulars), results in hostility

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138 Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 3.

139 Iwona Janicka, "Hegel on a Carrousel: Universality and the Politics of Translation in the Work of Judith Butler," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 36, no. 3 (2013): 364.

140 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 35.

141 Butler, 41.

142 Judith Butler, "Competing Universalities," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 167.

143 Butler, 168–69.

towards the particular. Thus, an abstract universal does not work towards the creation of a "true and all-inclusive universality."[144] Through its exclusion of particularity, the abstract universal destroys the very particular which it professed to include.

An abstract universal, due to its limited nature, is always proven false by the discovery or addition of new data. The abstract universal will always encounter some element that it cannot include or cover, and which therefore defines the limitations of the claimed universal.[145] Butler attempts to solve the problem of Hegel's abstract universal by introducing the idea of *competing universalities*, a concept of the universal which derives from the interaction of different particulars. Each particularity holds its own version of the universal. When these versions encounter each other, there is a confrontation of differing universals — thus, competing universalities. These competing universals, rather than presenting a claim that each universal it is divergent from is a false universal and, therefore, particular, should instead employ practices of translation in their quest for reconciliation. In Butler's view, it is necessary to establish such translation practices between competing ideas of universality, as their claims may be part of coinciding social or political intents, and cooperation between the two would offer a more effective approach to accomplishing lasting and ongoing social change.[146] For Butler, the failure of universality to respond to particularity and to adapt itself in response to culture is what is behind the violence that can occur from the convergence of the universal and the particular.[147]

This act of translation has counter-colonialist possibilities, as it makes visible the hidden limits of a dominant language and culture. According to Butler, this translation is also essential to any understanding of universality today. She asserts that in today's increasingly interconnected world, Hegel's idea of universality can only be achieved through the process of cultural

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144 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 23–24.
145 Richard Shillcock, "The Concrete Universal and Cognitive Science," *Axiomathes* 24, no. 1 (March 2014): 65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10516-013-9210-y.
146 Butler, "Competing Universalities," 167.
147 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 23–24.

translation.[148] As such, the universal should not be dismissed in favor of historical particularity, but should instead be considered as a historical construct itself. However, Butler notes that if various movements and groups proclaim what is universally true for all of humanity, yet fail to agree on what "good" is, and understand their relationship to their proposed universal in opposing discourse, what results is a series of competing universals.[149]

These competing universals, however, are contradictory. On the one hand, there is a focus on the equalizing of the content of cultures perceived to be homogenous; on the other, there is a focus on what sets them apart as independent, rejecting a collective identity. What results is a series of particulars relabeled as universals that are able to relate to each other but which are not fully integrated As such, Butler's notion of competing universals through cultural translation does not quite hit upon an ideal approach to reconciliation between universality and particularity, as it just shifts what needs to be reconciled into a different domain.

CONCRETE UNIVERSALS

An alternate way of attempting to synthesize the seemingly opposed concepts of universality and particularity is through considering the notion of true universality not as a pre-existing thing, but as something that we must progress toward, in which ongoing revisions and resolutions of universality are fundamental to the very concept.[150] As such, in our striving toward universality, we must take note that the universal is in a state of constant revision, continuously being renegotiated and redefined in a repeated attempt towards reconciliation between the universal and the particular. It is this idea of a constantly changing universal that Hegel termed a "concrete universal."[151] For Hegel, an abstract universal is that of false knowledge and irrationality, while a concrete universal is

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148 Butler, 20.
149 Butler, "Competing Universalities," 163.
150 Butler, "Restaging the Universal," 23.
151 Slavoj Žižek, "Holding the Place," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2000), 316; Laclau, "Structure, History and the Political," 192–93.

that of true knowledge and rationality. In the realm of abstract universals, if particulars are defined as distinct entities that are distinguishable from and determined by others, this, therefore, means that the abstract universal itself is necessarily particular.

Abstract universality is defined by its indifference to social conditions and lack of regard for the particularities of context and circumstance. As such, it does not account for all individuals or situations when one abstract universal conflicts with another abstract universal. Dipesh Chakrabarty demonstrates this through his account of the forced and violent inoculation by European doctors of colonized Indians against smallpox, despite their objection and resistance based on their religious and cultural beliefs. While the doctors believed that the act was morally right, they were doing so with no regard for the traditions and culture of the villagers themselves. Chakrabarty highlights the complexity of this action, noting that protecting the Indians against smallpox could be as much considered a universally "good" act as violating their safety and custom could be a universally "bad" one.[152]

An attempt to improve upon abstract universals, *concrete universality* moves towards a synthesis of the universal and the particular, despite their apparent logical incompatibility. As Žižek notes:

> … Hegelian 'dialectical development' is not a deployment of a particular concept within universality but the process by which, in the passage from one particularity to another, *the very universality that encompasses both also changes*: 'concrete universality' designates precisely this 'inner life' of universality itself, this process of Passage in the course of which the very universality that aims at encompassing it is caught in it, submitted to transformation.[153]

Concrete universality is neither neutral nor static, but instead endlessly shifting and adjusting to accommodate particularity, through the consideration of particulars. The concrete universal as an

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152 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Reissue, with a new preface by the author, Princeton Studies in Culture, Power, History (Princeton, NJ: Univ. Press, 2008), 45.
153 Žižek, "Holding the Place," 316.

idea is continually redefined, renegotiated, and adjusted in an ongoing process towards achieving true universality.

Concrete universality responds to the problem of uniting a multitude of distinct entities without denying the differences between them. Hegel's notion of the concrete universal suggests that the universal is nothing more than the totality of relationships between particulars, which, at the same time, is what establishes their difference. It is, therefore, always the third category in the dialectical movement. However, Adorno asserted that Hegel's suggestion of a single totality containing all particulars excludes the individual of and the complexity of relations between these particulars, rather than uniting them in a single harmonious whole. As a result, anything that does not fit neatly into the category is excluded.[154] This means that what Hegel describes as a concrete universal is indeed still abstract. However, the broad idea of the concrete universal still suggests a universality that attempts to be more inclusive of difference than an abstract universal.

For Žižek, in order for universality to become concrete, it cannot remain indifferent to its particulars but instead must include itself within its particulars.[155] In such a view of the universal, we can only wind up with particulars, not universality in any form, and ultimately some particular asserting itself as a universal. Furthermore, such a version of concrete universality does not demonstrate any development leading from one universality to another. Instead, we end up with a juxtaposition of various versions of universality, which suggests a choice is possible between them. However, no version can be found to be the obvious or forced choice. While Hegel's concrete universality, through its constant shifting and adjusting to accommodate the particular, eliminates

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154 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 311.
155 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1999), 92.

the problem of abstract, Eurocentric universals, it does not adequately accommodate the individual, nor does it ensure the complete integration of the particular into the universal.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS

Towards the end of the twentieth century, reflections of attempts to reconcile the diametrically opposed ideals of universality and particularity began to be visible in photography, as will be demonstrated by these final case studies. The two remaining photographers attempt to find a resolution between the universal and particular, corresponding with Butler and Hegel's ideas. Ultimately, neither photographer is entirely successful in their approach, but both make progress towards reconciling universality and particularity in their photographs.

Case Study 5: Morna Livingston's Cultural Translation of Indian Stepwells

Working in the tradition of past photographers such as O'Sullivan and Weston, architectural historian and photographer Morna Livingston transforms culturally significant structures, especially Indian stepwells, into images of formal and geometric abstraction. She differs, however, in the way in which she expresses an interest in the history of these structures, presenting her images alongside extensive information regarding each stepwell's specific purpose, location, and history. Additionally, the final chapter of the book is devoted to discussing the various ways in which these stepwells continue to be used by local communities and demonstrating how this has led to some level of preservation for these structures, despite the lack of global attention or interest.

Livingston explicitly states her aim of bringing the culture, history, religious ritual, and architectural brilliance of Indian water structures to an audience outside of the subcontinent. "While these underground water monuments comprise one of India's major building traditions," Livingston notes in her introduction to *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India, "*they are perhaps the

most neglected of the world's great bodies of architecture."[156] Rather than emphasizing particularity

through the creation of a false mythical context, Livingston provides an accurate historical

background to aid her readers in understanding the social, political, economic, and religious

significance of the stepwells she photographed, aided by the inclusion of diagrams, plans, and maps.

Indian stepwells fulfilled the vital function of ensuring a reliable source of water in the

dramatic climate of the subcontinent by providing direct access to the water table during various

points in the region's monsoon cycle, which oscillates between periods of heavy rainfall and

extended periods of drought. The form of these water sources evolved from somber and elementary

wells cut into rock around 200 – 400 CE to elaborate and extravagantly adorned underground

monuments over the next few centuries.[157] Much more than simple wells, stepwells were critical to

the socioeconomic and civic needs of communities, serving as areas of respite from the sun and

heat, social gathering places, and community spiritual centers. Women in particular, who bore the

responsibility of collecting water, utilized these spaces to pray and hold rituals away from the more

rigid strictures of a temple. The utilitarian, social, and religious functions of these structures were

interwoven and indistinguishable. These stepwells would arguably have been the most important

structure in a community, and as such, a study limited to their architecture and appearance would be

superficial and incomplete. Indeed, in her book, Livingston not only offers a historical overview of

the importance of these structures but is also careful to name specific structures and locations and to

offer a concise history of individual stepwells.[158]

Despite this stated aim of providing extensive information regarding the stepwells, as well as

her commentary on the critical role stepwells played in Indian social and cultural life, many of

Livingston's photographs fail to convey the historical, social, and cultural significance of these

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156 Morna Livingston, *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), xix.
157 Samir S. Patel, "India's Underground Water Temples," *Archaeology* 64, no. 3 (June 2011): 36.
158 Livingston, *Steps to Water*.

magnificent structures. While some images capture the ornate sculptural elements, massive size, or social role of the structures, others fall into the trope of reducing the historically significant edifices to geometric abstraction, much in line with the universalizing modernist approach to ruin and object photography. In *Kapadvanj Stepped Pond with its many shrines,* 2002. [Fig. 17] the steps and shrine doorways of the interior of the stepwell form a repeating geometric pattern, exaggerated by the contrast between the dark entryways and the bright stones forming the stairways. The scale of the structure, while hinted at with the number of floors visible, remains ambiguous, as does the content of the doorways themselves. While the title suggests that the numerous chambers shown are indeed shrines, the image gives no visual indication of their importance. The details of the carvings around the entryways are lost to overexposure, suggesting that Livingston was more interested in the form of the geometric pattern than the significance of the stepwell itself.

In the text, however, Livingston goes into great detail regarding the cultural and architectural significance of the well. She describes in detail the steps, explaining how pilgrims "step down from the pool's rim onto 'moon steps,' hemispherical stairs that are sun symbols (incorrectly described everywhere as moons) set between two large shells. Moon steps, their form borrowed from temple shrines, are both ornamental and symbolic endings for the stairs."[159] Also noted in the text is the strategic location of the well and the role the well and the foreign trade it attracted played in the surrounding community during the Middle Ages. There is a disconnect between the messages suggested in the text and the photograph. The image suggests a universality through the geometric patterns created by architectural features, while the text focuses on the cultural and architectural significance of the well.

Several of Livingston's images, such as *Steps at Chand Baori, Abhaneri, Rajasthan* (2002) [Fig. 18], with their dark shadows and flattening of volumes into pure geometric forms, bear a striking resemblance to the previously discussed photographs taken by Weston. In her photograph of

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159 Livingston, 73.

Figure 17: Morna Livingston, *Kapadvanj Stepped Pond with its many shrines,* 2002. In *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India*

Figure 18: Morna Livingston, *Steps at Chand Baori, Abhaneri, Rajasthan,* 2002. In *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India*

Chand Baori, Livingston focuses on the play of light and shadows created by the stairs of the interior of the well, bypassing the iconic imagery of the maze of stairs the structure has become known for. The depth of the structure is lost to the viewer, as Livingston instead flattens the expansive space into a series of geometric patterns through the use of extreme shadow and high camera angle, abstracting the architectural features in a manner that is very much reminiscent of Weston's *Pirámide de Cuernavaca with Two Landings.* The photograph again reaches towards the universal through formal abstraction, but the accompanying writing focuses on the particularity of the sites themselves. As a result, tension is created between the images and the written words.

Through the pairing of the visual universalization of the images of stepwells with the textual descriptions regarding the particular culture which created them, Livingston is essentially attempting to translate across cultural lines as suggested by Butler. The transforming of the structures into abstracted subjects of modernist photographs makes them more agreeable to the traditional western architectural canon, while the emphasis on the particular cultural elements of the Stepwells allows them to stand apart from the western narrative as unique structures. However, while Livingston might be making a conscious attempt to reconcile the universal and the particular, she fails to accomplish this. Instead, she provides a distinct pair of accounts, in which the reader/viewer alternates between the universality of the modernist images and the contrasting particularity of the other contents of the book, rather than encountering both within the photographic plane. Furthermore, the fundamental changes in the appearance of the stepwells in order to include them in the art historical narrative does not challenge or question the enduring canon. As a result, while Livingston is able to somewhat successfully culturally translate these structures, she still fails to reach a synthesis of the universal and the particular, and the abstraction in her images reads as more an erasure or omission of context than a movement towards some universal element of humanity that integrates the particular.

Case Study 6: The Concrete Universal in Gerardo Suter's *El archivo fotográfico del Profesor Retus*

In his 1985 series, *El archivo fotográfico del Profesor Retus (The Photographic Archive of Professor Retus),* the Argentine-Mexican photographer Gerardo Suter attempted to reconstruct an invented past through the manipulation of photographs. The series, consisting entirely of images of pre-Columbian ruins, frames itself as a collection of documentary photographs from the fictional archaeologist, Professor Retus, that he captured while lost in the jungles of Chiapas.[160] Presented with the images was a secondary fabricated account that Suter had discovered the photographs in the ruins of an old house in Mexico City after the 1985 earthquake, offering a false provenance to the collection.[161] The fictitious origin story of the series not only challenges the fidelity of versions of history developed from nineteenth-century explorers and amateur archaeologists but calls attention to the constructed nature of all history as well.

The photographs reflect and reproduce the views of some of Suter's photographic predecessors, who saw Mesoamerican objects and architecture as being steeped in mystery and mysticism. The slight discoloration of the images, achieved through chemical manipulation, does more than merely artificially age the photographs to aid in Suter's deception of the audience. The opalescent sheen and eerie colors lend the prints an unearthly quality, reflecting the perceived mystical aura that expeditioners often associated with Mesoamerican ruins and artifacts. This construction of a mythical context around the ruins acts as a continuation of the approaches used by Le Plongeon and Man Ray, working to particularize the ruins, as well as Mesoamerican culture as a whole. At the same time, Suter's approach to the actual photographing of the ruins works in the tradition of abstraction of O'Sullivan and Weston. The photographs in the series are permeated with

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160 Olivier Debroise, *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 105.

161 Mary Schneider Enriquez, "Rites of Memory: The Photographs and Video Installations of Gerardo Suter," in *Labyrinth of Memory*, ed. Joseph R. Wolin, 1999, 12.

avant-garde formalism, most notably through the flattening of volumes into geometric forms and the utilization of light and shadow to obscure as well as to reveal it.

In *Retorno al templo imaginario (Return to the Imaginary Temple)* [Fig. 19], the visible portions of the temple are reduced to a series of black forms that visually meld together through the compression of distance and stand in stark contrast to the gloomy cloud-filled sky reminiscent of Weston's cloud photographs. Suter blends visual elements of both universalizing and particularizing approaches. There is a distinct referencing of modernist emphasis on form, resulting in an ambiguity of subject matter; the only indication that the forms within the frame are, in fact, sections of a temple comes from the title. The juxtaposition of the temple with the dramatic clouds recalls Le Plongeon's *Platform of Venus* composite print, and the effect is much the same, removing the temple from its historical context and placing it instead in an otherworldly setting. The light striking the stone monoliths highlights their scarred surfaces and, while there is no clear cultural or historical context provided for the temple, there is an acknowledgment of history through the pockmarked stone. The tear running through the image not only lends an aged quality to support the fabricated narrative of Retus but adds a suggestion of violence that mirrors the violence inflicted upon Mesoamerican societies by colonizers and subsequent expeditioners.

In *Frento al muro de las palabras (Before the Wall of Words)* [Fig. 20], an expanse of an elaborately carved pre-Hispanic stone wall is interrupted by a dark shadow that cuts across it, as clouds float overhead. While the image depicts ancient ruins, it is by no means documentary. The structure is reduced to simple forms, and the geometric carvings on the bottom half of the image stand in stark contrast to the organic clouds at the top. However, while there is a leaning towards universalism through the formal abstraction, the carvings on the wall are crisp and easy to read, unlike Weston's and Livingston's images, which tend to eliminate the details of carvings in their
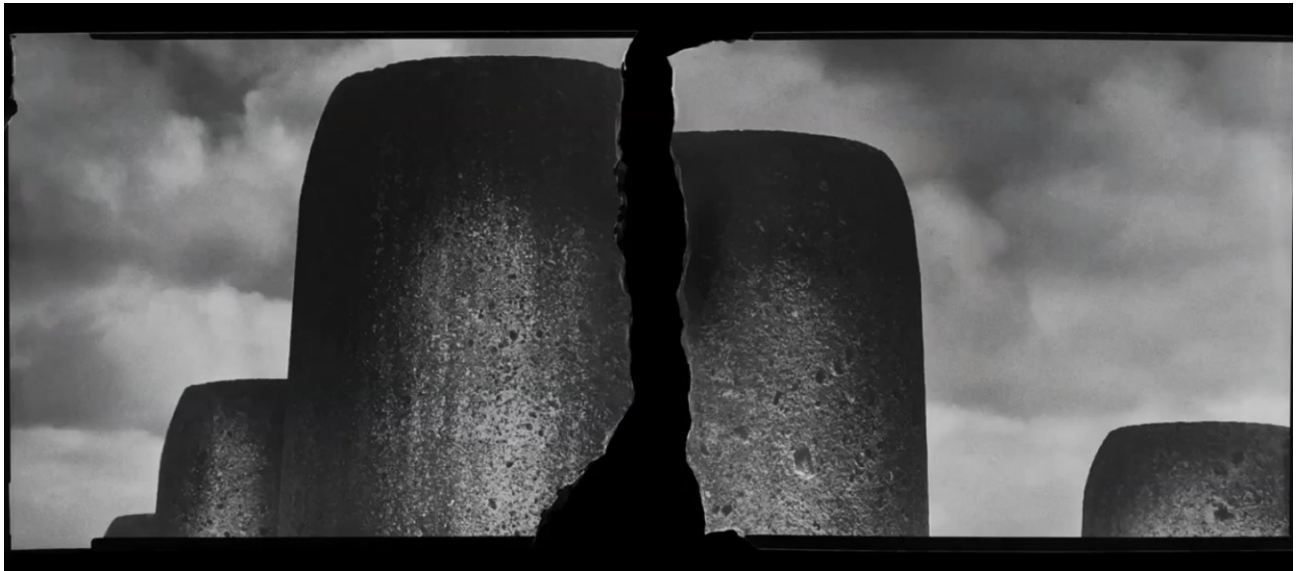
Figure 19: Gerardo Suter, *Retorno al templo imaginario (Return to the Imaginary Temple),* 1985. In *Labyrinth of Memory, ed. Joseph R Wolin* (New York, NY: The Americas Society, 1999)

Figure 20: Gerardo Suter, *Frento al muro de las palabras (Before the Wall of Words),*1985. In *Labyrinth of Memory, ed. Joseph R Wolin*

striking for exploring form. There is a juxtaposition between the universal and the particular, but one that is harmonious, rather than full of tension as with Livingston's photographic attempts to synthesize the two.

Similarly, in *Tollan 14* [Fig. 21] Suter combines the attention to the particular with an element of myth and abstraction. The top of a carved portion of a pillar is visible, the light and shadow enhancing the cuts in the stone that then fade into darkness. On the right looms a mass of black, presumably another pillar, shrouded in shadow. Behind the pillars, a stormy sky with hints of opalescent pink, created by Suter's chemical distressing, adds an element of mystical ominousness. Again we see the attempt to combine the particularist tendency to create myth with a universalist concern with form and abstraction.

Through this photographic series, Suter is continuing the tradition of representing the history of "othered" cultures through the replacement or erasure of original context through either formal

abstraction or the creation of myth. Through the combining of universalizing formal abstraction with a focus on particularity and mythical construction, Suter's work seems to reach for a reconciliation of universality and particularity. While there is a move towards formal abstraction, suggesting a universally connected humanity, it is done through the lens of mystical particularity. Suter's approach abandons Butler's notion of universality needing cultural translation, instead embracing Hegel's concept of concrete universality. Rather than focusing on an abstracted idea of the universal that can never be achieved, this approach makes space for the reconciling of the universal with the particular through the revisiting and revising of the universal through the lens of particularity. However, Suter's approach to synthesis does not entirely solve the problem of how to reconcile the universal and the

Figure 21: Gerardo Suter, *Tollan 14,* 1984. 15×15 cm. In Esther Gabara, *Errant Modernism: The Ethos of Photography in Mexico and Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008)

particular, as the references to history and culture are ambiguous and incomplete, focusing on the perceived mystic elements rather than the actual historical and cultural context. While the particular is present in these photographs, it is not culturally translated and instead presents itself as a mystical other. As such, it remains distinct and the particular is not fully integrated into the universal.

CONCLUSION

The drive to write a more complete narrative of art history, one which transcends borders between particulars such as geographic location, religion, sex, and class, necessitates the synthesis of particular contexts into a universal narrative thread. Attempts at reconciling the concepts of the universal and the particular have long been subjects of debate within the scholarly community, and have manifested themselves visually in artworks throughout modernity.

Photography has been utilized as a means of exploring history through either a universalist or particularist lens since the early years of the medium. In the nineteenth century, August Le Plongeon and Timothy O'Sullivan used cameras as part of information-gathering surveys but ultimately tainted their supposedly documentary images with their individual notions of how to view history. Le Plongeon created myths around the Maya, representing the culture as a mystical particular other,

while O'Sullivan served as a forerunner to modernism, seaming to strive for universality through his moves towards formal abstraction. Early twentieth-century photographers Man Ray and Edward Weston refined these approaches through an artistic lens — the former by imbuing sculptures with a sense of magical animation, the latter through further abstraction and focus on form. These differing approaches attempt to embody the opposed ideas of universality and particularity, although both manage to fall short of fully capturing the ideals. Through their emphasis on particularity through a

western lens, Le Plongeon and Man Ray only managed to create false particularity, filled with magic

and mysticism, that reinforced the idea of a collective "other" into which all non-Western cultures

fell. In contrast, O'Sullivan and Weston leaned towards the universal through an emphasis on

geometric form, claimed to be a universal language. Yet in doing so, both photographers minimized

or eliminated the particular cultural elements of what they were photographing. As such, their

approaches suggest that in order to achieve the universal, all difference must be erased or eliminated.

Both universalism and particularism raise problems, particularly when related to the consideration of

marginalized groups. While universalism is built upon Western ideas, furthering the notion that

Europe and America values should form the neutral standard of modernity, particularism focuses on

difference, continuing the process of othering that was fundamental in establishing colonial rule.

The works of the more recent photographers Morna Livingston and Gerardo Suter seem to

attempt to bridge the divide between the universal and the particular, but in two distinct ways.

Livingston attempts to incorporate particular histories through text in order to translate the concept of

the universal to transcend cultural limits, reflecting an approach in line with Butler's competing

universalities approach to reconciling universalism and particularism. In contrast, Suter focuses on

visually harmonizing the two, revisiting history and the notion of the universal through the

consideration and inclusion of the particular, reflecting elements of Hegel's concept of the concrete

universal.

Ultimately, both photographers make progress in the reconciliation of universalism and

particularism but fall short of solving the problem in its entirety. While Livingston brings in specific

histories and cultural context for the stepwells in her photographs, the universality of the images does

not fully integrate with the particularity of the informative text. There is an alternation between the

universal and the particular, or between two distinct competing universals, but never reaching a point

of compromise. While both are present in her book, they are treated as distinct entities rather than

fully merging into a single whole; the divide between the universal and the particular remains. On the other hand, Suter succeeds at visually reconciling the particularist construction of myth with universalizing geometric abstraction and formalism of modernism. However, missing from these images are the particular histories and contexts of the sites and structures he photographed. The particular is not translated into the universal but rather remains a mystical interpretation of otherness, presented within a universal. Thus, Suter's reconciliation is incomplete, succeeding only on an artistic level, and some further development is needed in order to arrive at an approach that would be relevant outside of the realm of art.

The solution, it seems, is to combine the independent approaches of Livingston and Suter or, put a different way, to combine Butler's competing universalities with Hegel's concrete universals. Acknowledging competing universals and incorporating particular context and cultural history, as Livingston attempts, is necessary for constructing a more inclusive, and indeed truly universal, art historical narrative. However, if these particularities are kept separate and distinct, they continue to be thought of as an addendum and to create tension with the dominant narrative, as is the result in Livingston's work. The particular must be fully integrated and included in the universal in order for that universal to be concrete rather than abstract.

When it comes to the teaching of art history, focused introductory classes based on regions or themes can lead to a more in-depth understanding of the particulars of art history, but this is similar to a cultural translation approach. The art of that area or time period is understood, but it is often considered isolated from the greater holistic narrative. Conversely, revising existing survey formats to incorporate marginalized groups, similar to a concrete universal approach, not only does not allow sufficient time for a global overview of the history of art, but can lead to an overcomplicated and difficult to follow narrative timeline. Instead, it seems that the best approach to the teaching of art history might be to combine the two approaches, adjusting the narrative canon of art to center upon

different categories than the existing chronological and geographical ones that have been established based on European art history, thus making it possible to cover more of art history and to build a greater understanding of global issues that have influenced art over the ages.

If an approach that advocates Hegel's concept of the concrete universal is used, while at the same time acknowledging the need for cultural translations competing universals, the dominant historical narrative can be revisited, reworked, and indeed rewritten to integrate and emphasize particular narratives, artists, and voices within the supposed universal narrative, working to shift the primary narrative from an abstract universal to a more complete concrete universal. This means that historical and art historical narratives must always be in flux, shifting and growing as new elements and viewpoints are added to its timeline, in order to find the true universals of human history through the synthesis of the two poles of universality and particularity.

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