About the Department

The MSU Department of Anthropology engages in our discipline as a humanistic science of cultural and biological diversity across time and space. Our strength is in our diversity of approaches to this fundamental inquiry. We specialize in sociocultural anthropology, archaeology, medical anthropology, biological anthropology, and anthropological linguistics. We work towards an understanding of the human condition, past and present, in countries across the world and in our own backyards.

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Success stories in anthropology come via many different paths. However anthropology informs your career, whether you are a practicing anthropologist inside or outside the academy, we want to hear from you.

Contact us with your stories.
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Cover Photo: Taken by Kelsey Merreck
Wagner in Vientiane, Laos
Professor Gabriel Wrobel awarded Fulbright Specialist Award

By Jarad Cornett

Department of Anthropology Professor Dr. Gabriel Wrobel was awarded the Fulbright Specialist Award to complete a project with the Institute of Archaeology in Belize. At the Belize Institute of Archaeology, Dr. Wrobel gave talks about archaeology, cultural heritage, bioarchaeology, and digital heritage for high school and college students with the goal of generating interest in the Institute’s work and spreading awareness of volunteer opportunities with the Institute.

All archaeology research carried out in Belize is monitored by the Belize Institute of Archaeology. Dr. Wrobel has worked with the institute for 20 years, developing close relationships with the staff and recently working with the director to create digital resources for education and training.

Dr. Wrobel described the experience as fantastic, saying, “The students and teachers seemed to really enjoy the presentations. The Institute had a number of students reach out to them about pursuing internship and volunteer opportunities, as well. And both the Belize Ministry of Education and the US Embassy have expressed interest in working with us to continue these efforts.”

The Fulbright Specialist Program pairs U.S. academics and professionals with host institutions abroad to share their expertise, strengthen institutional linkages, gain international experience, and learn about other cultures while networking at their overseas host institutions. Fulbright Specialist Program projects generally last between two and six weeks and are approved to take place all throughout the year.
MSU unveils observatory foundation more than a century old

Discovery gives insight into campus history, provides educational opportunities

By Alexandra Tekip; Photographs by Nick Schrader and MSU Archives

In summer of 2023, workers from Michigan State University Infrastructure Planning and Facilities, or IPF, were installing hammock posts close to student residence halls near West Circle Drive when they encountered a hard, impenetrable surface under the ground.

Believing it to be either a large rock or building foundation, IPF called MSU’s Campus Archaeology Program, or CAP. After cross-checking old maps, campus archaeologists determined that it was the foundation of the first observatory on MSU’s campus, constructed in 1881.

“The campus archaeology program is designed to protect and mitigate our below ground heritage here at MSU,” said Stacey Camp, director of CAP and associate professor of anthropology at MSU, “We collaborate with IPF on construction projects and we are involved in preplanning stages to ensure that if they potentially hit an archaeological site, we can protect it in some manner.”

The observatory discovery gives insight into how scientific observation, as well as life on campus, has changed over the last 140-plus years.

“It gives us a sense of what early campus looked like in the late 19th century,” said Ben Akey, MSU campus archaeologist and anthropology doctoral student. “The original campus observatory was built and used at a time when Michigan Agricultural College — what would become MSU — was a radically different institution with only a handful of professors and a relatively small student body.”

“It gives us a sense of what early campus looked like in the late 19th century,” said Ben Akey, MSU campus archaeologist and anthropology doctoral student. “The original campus observatory was built and used at a time when Michigan Agricultural College — what would become MSU — was a radically different institution with only a handful of professors and a relatively small student body.”

Akey’s role entails collaborating with IPF to keep up with campus construction projects, researching any discoveries and supervising crews of students participating in on-campus archaeological dig sites. Working closely with MSU Archives, Akey conducted most of the research to confirm that IPF’s discovery was indeed the foundation of the first campus observatory. They also drew on the book “Stars Over the Red Cedar” by Horace A. Smith, professor emeritus in the MSU Department of Physics and Astronomy for additional information.

“I did a lot of reading to learn more about the first observatory: its history, how it was used and what the building itself might have looked like,” Akey said.

Astronomical observation at MSU: Then and now

Located just behind what is now Wills House, the first observatory on MSU’s campus was built by Professor Rolla Carpenter. An 1873 graduate of Michigan State Agricultural College, Carpenter returned as a professor and taught a wide variety of courses, including mathematics, astronomy, French and civil engineering.

“In the early days of MSU’s astronomy program, Carpenter would take students to the roof of College Hall and have them observe from there, but he didn’t find it a sufficient solution for getting students experience in astronomical observation,” Akey said. “When MSU acquired a telescope, Carpenter successfully argued for funding for a place to mount it: the first campus observatory.

Today, the MSU observatory is located just south of campus at the intersection of Forest and College roads. It boasts a 24-inch telescope and is used for undergraduate and graduate education and research, as well as faculty research. It also hosts free public observation nights.

Levi Webb is a fourth-year astrophysics and anthropology major who works at MSU’s current campus observatory and participated in the archaeological dig of the first on-campus observatory.

“It’s amazing to see how far we’ve come from a little 16-foot circular building to a
large building with a high-quality telescope and an electric dome,” Webb said. “Seeing the difference between how observing used to be versus how it is now is very interesting to me and makes me appreciative of the observatory we have now.”

**Real-world experience: Field school and summer digs**

While most students who work with campus archaeology are anthropology majors, some — like Webb — have backgrounds in other areas of study. In addition to Webb, the observatory dig crew included students majoring in classical and romance studies and forensics.

“Having students from majors outside anthropology gives us a different perspective on what we’re finding in the ground,” said Camp. “We feel really lucky to have a wide variety of knowledge on our dig sites.”

Akey said working on a dig site, such as the first campus observatory, helps prepare students for careers in archaeology.

“CAP provides an essential venue of professional training for both graduate students and undergraduates in archaeological fieldwork in analysis,” Akey said.

One training opportunity is an undergraduate field school led by CAP. Most archaeology and anthropology programs require fieldwork, which is often done overseas and can often be costly. Every other summer, MSU hosts a field school that gives Michigan students who are interested in archaeology, but may not have the financial resources to travel abroad, an opportunity to do hands-on work on an actual site.

For the upcoming field school in 2024, CAP is planning to focus on the first observatory site.

“Next summer, we’re planning to run an undergraduate archaeological field school where students can enroll for credit and get experience excavating the foundation of the first observatory on campus,” Camp said. “We anticipate having 18 to 20 students work on the project and get great experience doing archaeology.”

Camp said seeing students develop an interest in connecting the past with the present Energizes her.

“I love watching students connect with artifacts and try to tell a bigger story about humankind with those objects,” she said.

**Connecting past and present**

Akey said they appreciate the unique opportunity to learn more about MSU’s campus history while developing skills that will serve them beyond the completion of their Ph.D.

“One of the things I value most about archaeological work is kind of building a sense of connection to landscapes and people,” they said. “With a campus this old, there’s a lot of historic materials, archaeological materials that would be disturbed by all the ongoing construction on campus. Because of our partnership with IPF, those objects are not disturbed, and we get a chance to document and analyze some of them. It’s a pretty cool job.”

Camp was initially drawn to archaeology as a tactile way to interact with history and gain new perspectives.

“Archaeology gives us a bit more knowledge about how people lived in the past, how they did things differently and how maybe we could do things differently in the contemporary world as well,” she said.

Webb sees this firsthand through his work at the observatory and on archaeological dig sites.

“In my job working outreach at the observatory, I meet people who graduated from MSU many, many years ago who come and see the work that we’re doing, and they’re very proud to see how campus has grown,” he said. “I have even more insight into the campus’ evolution after learning about the first observatory and the history of scientific observation on campus.”

Camp said she feels honored to connect MSU’s past to its present through her work with CAP.

“MSU is a passionate and dedicated community,” she said. “Spartans are very invested in this campus and its history, and being able to share a little bit of my knowledge with people is very rewarding.”
Department of Anthropology graduate student Aubree Marshall was the 2023 awardee of the Commonwealth Heritage Group Diversity Scholarship Award in Archaeology. This scholarship, which is open to both graduate and undergraduate students, is aimed at assisting MSU Department of Anthropology students who are interested in pursuing public archaeology. Further preference is given to students with a high financial need, are first generation college students, or are educationally disadvantaged.

This scholarship, sponsored by MSU Department of Anthropology alumni Don Weir and the President of Chronical Heritage Andrew Weir, is in support of the donors’ goal of promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion within the Department of Anthropology and the greater field of archaeology. Promoting diversity in archaeology is important to Don Weir, who shared:

“I attended my first Society for American Archaeology (SAA) conference in 1974 and was surprised to see that the profession, at least as represented by this conference was primarily white and male. The profession has come a long way since then especially with including women into the profession. I’m not sure of the actual statistics but I notice at the last Society for Historical Archeology (SHA) conference had a majority of women on its Board. What the profession lacks in sufficient members from underrepresented minorities.”

On the importance of diversity in archaeology, scholarship awardee Aubree Marshall said, “I believe that archaeology needs people from different backgrounds to bring new perspectives and innovative ideas to the field.” Don Weir agreed, stating, “The perspectives that diversity will provide will help to understand the people and cultures that archaeologists study. A great example of this is the important roles Native Americans are currently providing in the interpretation of indigenous sites.”

Being awarded this diversity scholarship was meaningful to Aubree as a first-generation student. Her eventual goal post-graduation is to become a professor. “I love to teach and have had the opportunity to teach at a few different capacities since arriving at MSU,” Aubree shared, adding, “one of my favorite moments is when I'm teaching a student about a topic and I see their eyes light up once the information clicks.” In pursuit of this goal, she is also working towards the Certificate of College Teaching offered at Michigan State University, a program that aims to prepare graduate students for future teaching roles.

As for the future of the field of archaeology, Don Weir said:

“I think the future of archaeology will be a combination of traditional, community and public archaeology. Archaeologists at the academic level will continue to provide cutting edge research into the science and methodology of archaeology and will train future archaeologists. This will include community archaeology that engages community member in local archaeology. A great example of this is the work that Stacy Camp is doing with the Campus Archaeology program at MSU. It has been said that 90% of the future jobs for archaeologists will be in public archaeology. This will include individuals working in the private sector as well as State and Federal agencies. It is critical for those who are teaching our future archaeologists to understand that most of their students will likely practice public archaeology.”

Commonwealth Heritage Group Diversity Scholarship Award in Archaeology donor Don Weir is the founder and retired chairman of Commonwealth Heritage Foundation, as well as being an alumnus of Michigan State University’s Department of Anthropology. Scholarship donor Andrew Weir is the President of Chronical Heritage. Aubree Marshall is a third year PhD student studying archaeology in the Department of Anthropology.
Associate Professor Heather Howard awarded the 2023 College of Social Science Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Excellence Award

By Jalen Smith

Associate Professor of Anthropology Dr. Heather Howard has been named the College of Social Science’s recipient of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Award. This award recognizes a faculty member who plays a leadership role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion by demonstrating activities which may include serving underrepresented populations, developing or implementing innovative programs that enhance participation and opportunity, or enhancing the ability and effectiveness of the College to be an inclusive and welcoming environment.

The Office of the Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offers the Dean’s Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Awards once every two years. On even years, staff and graduate students receive awards. On odd years, faculty and undergraduate students receive awards.

“I think the award really brings attention to something that’s even more important than ever, to amplify the value of diversity,” Howard said.

“It’s due to our diversity and our capacity to learn from our diversity that has led us to be where we are. I think if we weren’t adaptable to change, and exercising our capacity to learn, we wouldn’t be around right now. Diversity is so fundamental to the flourishing of human beings, and we need to really play to that human strength.”

Howard has been a faculty member in the department of Anthropology since 2009. Before that, she was a visiting Ph.D. fellow and instructor from 2002 to 2004 and was an adjunct faculty member from 2007 to 2008. She has dedicated her career and research to advancing DEI efforts. She was recognized with the College of Social Science Diversity Champion Award in 2021. Howard was previously recognized as an Exemplary Diversity Scholar, National Center for Institutional Diversity in 2010 and was the Outstanding Faculty Award recipient from the MSU Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities in 2008.

“I have a genuine interest and honesty in wanting to learn from other people, no matter what their background, and to really elevate that in the classroom as something that all the students understand so that they can learn from each other, and that everybody has something important to contribute,” Howard said.

Howard primarily works with Indigenous communities and her research focuses on addressing social and structural inequities. Her research is carried out in a variety of settings including community centers, museums, clinics, and schools.

“My commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) excellence are integrated across my research, teaching, and service, which are centered on Indigenous community-identified priorities that cohere around decolonizing well-being and intersectional justice,” Howard said.

“My career centers on collaborative, Indigenous community-driven scholarship firmly grounded in Indigenous knowledge frameworks, solid relationship building, and the advancement of research meaningful to communities. This service to Indigenous communities is fundamental to every dimension of my work as a scholar, not because it sustains the trust needed to carry out research with Indigenous communities, but because it informs my responsibilities to serve the transformation of environments to be inclusive, value diversity, advance social justice, and support others in the realization of their full potential. This therefore extends to my work beyond Indigenous communities to the systems of social and cultural services, healthcare, and education that are usually the sites of my research.”

Howard hopes she can inspire other professors and colleagues to be more inclusive while diversifying their research.

“There is so much work that needs to be done to help people open their minds and realize how their work can be diversified, how they can be inclusive, how their work can be oriented towards social justice.”

Within the Department of Anthropology, Howard has recommended that professors create their own DEI statements, so students feel more included and welcome.

“I thought this might serve as a personal guide for individuals to identify how they might strive to meet DEI goals in their research, teaching, and service, and encourage conscious integration and personal reflection to get there.”

By Jalen Smith
Associate Professor Elizabeth Drexler’s new book, *Infrastructures of Impunity: New Order Violence in Indonesia*, released this past December by Cornell University Press.

In *Infrastructures of Impunity* Dr. Drexler makes a nuanced and compelling argument that the creation and persistence of impunity for the perpetrators of the Cold War Indonesian genocide (1965–66) is not only a legal status but also a cultural and social process. Impunity for the initial killings and for subsequent acts of political violence has many elements: bureaucratic, military, legal, political, educational, and affective. Although these elements do not always work at once, together they can be described as a unified entity, a dynamic infrastructure, whose existence explains the persistence of impunity. Dr. Drexler describes how truth telling, a first step in many responses to state violence, did not undermine the infrastructure but instead bent to it.

This book explores questions such as how can impunity be confronted if truth-telling and legal processes are not effective? How do we think about the human rights imperative to speak truth to power after decades of blatant impunity in post truth contexts? Building on critical discussions in anthropology, Dr. Drexler engages creative culture, performance and art exploring how they contribute to justice projects in the face of impunity. Dr. Drexler suggests that creative and artistic responses to revelations about the past, have begun to undermine the infrastructure by countering its temporality, affect, and social stigmatization and by demonstrating its contingency and specific actions, policies, and processes that would begin to dismantle it.

Dr. Drexler concludes by reflecting on how an infrastructure of impunity could take hold in an established democracy. “Impunity is not simply a legal process,” she says, “it is compounded by bureaucracy, culture, commonsense, media, and permeates to intimate realms of family.”

When asked what inspired this project, Dr. Drexler said, “I had the transformative experience of being in Indonesia when President Suharto resigned in 1998 and ended the authoritarian New Order regime after more than three decades. I participated in numerous discussions with human rights defenders, student activists, victims and their families, journalists and others about transitional justice, accountability, and reforms. I was inspired by the euphoria and hope of this moment.”

She witnessed the persistence of this struggle over the course of decades. “When I began an extended period of field research to explore how histories of past violence were narrated and struggled over as the fifty-year anniversary of the 1965 genocide approached, I came to understand the importance not just of the facts about past violence, but also their affective resonance. Time spent with younger activists impressed upon me the importance of engaging affect and I was inspired by their creative and arts-based activism that supported efforts for judicial solutions but also did something else entirely.”

At this point, Dr. Drexler said, the project shifted from analyzing the construction of historical narratives and practices of collective memory after violence to considering impunity itself. “Understanding how the institutions and processes designed to further accountability were subverted or contributed to the persistence of impunity disclosed an infrastructure.”

When asked why this topic is important now, Dr. Drexler replied, “Writing in the United States during a period in which truth and democratic processes were increasingly under threat and social life increasingly polarized allowed me to see that the infrastructure I had identified in Indonesia could also operate in the United States. Impunity contributes to the erosion of the rule of law and democracy and creates situations of increased risk for mass atrocity and genocide. It is crucial to understand how impunity for past genocide and atrocities endures in democracies not only as the absence of prosecution for crimes, but in linked cultural, bureaucratic, legal, and affective realms that can be analyzed as an infrastructure of impunity. Understanding impunity as an infrastructure discloses how narratives and affect can transform law from an instrument of justice to means for extending impunity.”

Drexler is currently preparing articles analyzing the infrastructure of impunity in comparative contexts.

With support from an AIFIS-CAORC research fellowship, Dr. Drexler is currently in Indonesia conducting research for a new project, Seeing Injustice to Create Just Futures in Indonesia.

Dr. Elizabeth Drexler is also the Director of Peace and Justice Studies at Michigan State University. This is her second book on Indonesia. Her first, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State* won the Cecil B Currey prize in 2008. *Infrastructures of Impunity* is available now at the publisher’s website, cornellpress.cornell.edu.
The Michigan State University (MSU) Museum is delighted to announce the appointment of Dr. Ethan Watrall as Curator of Archaeology, effective August 15, 2023. Dr. Watrall’s expertise as an anthropological archaeologist coupled with his scholarly focus on the use of digital methods and computational approaches in archaeology and heritage will significantly enhance the Museum’s strategic priorities.

In his new role, Dr. Watrall will take the lead in developing, researching, interpreting, and stewarding the archaeological collections housed by the MSU Museum. With a deep passion for the power and purpose of museum collections, Dr. Watrall aims to ignite enthusiasm and engagement around the archaeological collections among students, faculty, and the broader community.

Known for his innovative work in digital heritage and archaeology, Dr. Watrall’s efforts will enhance the Museum’s mission by exploring the application of cutting-edge digital approaches such as collections digitization, augmented reality, physical computing, and mobile and place-based digital experiences. By applying this knowledge and expertise at the MSU Museum, he will enable creative and thoughtful approaches to making the archaeological collection more accessible and engaging for everyone.

“Like most archaeologists, I’ve spent much of my career working in and with museums,” said Dr. Watrall. “To play a more central role in my own campus museum is wildly exciting, and I am very much looking forward to bringing my own work, perspective, and experience to the space.”

Dr. Watrall’s appointment comes during a transformative shift for the MSU Museum, transitioning from being a repository of knowledge to becoming a catalyst for enriched teaching, learning, and research. With his expertise and vision, Dr. Watrall will play a key role in helping to shape the Museum’s dynamic future.

“We are thrilled to welcome Dr. Watrall to the MSU Museum,” said MSU Museum Director Devon Akmon. “His expertise and forward-thinking approach will undoubtedly enrich our efforts in advancing teaching, learning, research, and community outreach.”

As Associate Professor of Anthropology, Dr. Watrall will continue to fulfill his teaching, research, service, and outreach responsibilities in the Department of Anthropology, further strengthening the ties between the MSU Museum and the campus community.
Department of Anthropology Fieldwork Photo Contest Winners

By Jarad Cornett

This fall semester, the MSU Department of Anthropology held a fieldwork photo contest among graduate students. There were many amazing entries, and after an anonymous vote was held by non-participating faculty and graduate students a top three were selected for prizes.

Our first place winner is titled “Thresholds of Coexistence,” by Devashish Saurav. Devashish described the setting and context of this photo as follows: “in T-Gompa of Arunachal Pradesh (India), a moment of silent understanding unfolds between Tensing, a local, and a cow at the doorway of a Gaigot.”

Coming in second place was Kelsey Merreck Wagner’s submission, titled “Buddhist monk paints the perimeter of Wat Xieng Nyeun on the bank of the Mekong River in Vientiane, Laos.” Kelsey said “as my research focuses on how artists work to forge a more just future through creative action and placemaking, I couldn’t help but smile when I saw this monk maintaining the myriad of bright colors adorning the place he lives and works in.”

In third place was this entry from Priyanka Jayakodi taken in Dehiattakandiya, Sri Lanka, titled “Life amidst toxic swirls”. “During my last field visit to Sri Lanka,” Priyanka shared, “I stayed in a village for two months trying to understand what it is like to live in a place where Chronic Kidney Disease of uncertain etiology (CKDu) is prevalent. I spent most of my time talking to farmers about their agricultural practices, use of water, and agrochemicals. This photo was taken during a morning walk along a rice field.”
The Department of Anthropology is pleased to announce that Ph.D. candidate Rhian Dunn is one of 24 doctoral students who have been awarded the 2023 Graduate Research Fellowship by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). The NIJ is the research, development, and evaluation agency for the United States Department of Justice, which aims to promote research dedicated to improving “knowledge and understanding of crime and justice issues through science” (nij.ojp.gov/about-nij). Specifically, the Graduate Research Fellowship program supports doctoral students engaging in research that advances the NIJ’s mission.

Rhian will use the funds to cover expenses related to her dissertation research, titled “Sampling and Section Bias in Research using Documented Skeletal Collections.” She intends to identify potential sources of bias encountered in the initial research phase for forensic and biological anthropological studies using data from documented human skeletal collections.

The fellowship begins January 1st, 2024 and will run until May of 2025. She hopes that this dissertation research will enable forensic and biological anthropologists to better understand the extent of bias introduced in the research process and how such biases might affect the validity of historic methods still in use. Rhian acknowledges the support she has received from her committee members and her dissertation committee chair and advisor, Dr. Joseph T. Hefner, the PI on this grant.

Department of Anthropology Ph.D candidate Jeff Burnett has been awarded the Wenner-Gren Engaged Research Grant for his proposal titled “Oak Bluffs Historic Highlands Archaeology Project”. For this project Jeffrey will be conducting a landscape study that utilizes archaeological methods, archival data, and oral histories and stories to map the beginnings and growth of a Black vacationing community in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts.

The Oak Bluffs Historic Highlands Archaeology (OBH-HA) project is a community-based historic landscape study that utilizes archaeological methods, archival data, and oral histories and stories to map the beginnings and growth of a Black vacationing community in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. This study proposes to explore a history of placemaking through the experiences of Black vacationers in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs, a resort community on the island of Martha’s Vineyard.

This past summer researchers with the project conducted oral historical interviews with local residents and descendants. We also used non-invasive archaeological methods to map the remnants of a late-19th – early 20th - century site of Baptist Revivals. Going forward Jeff will be working with community members and local college students to reconstruct and understand the historical communities of the Highlands / East Chop using census and deed records. These findings will be represented on a public-facing digital map of property ownership which will display changes in the community over time.

The Engaged Research Grant is designed to benefit local communities as well as academic research and anthropological methods and theory. With the funds, Jeff has been able to compensate some participants for their time, facilitating the active participation of college students and individuals with full-time jobs. The Engaged Research Grant also requires equipment purchased for the project stay within the community, making it possible for the work and experience to extend far beyond the current project.
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