

Dr. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa
Chair, Search Committee
Department of Art History and History
George Mason University
Via email sleblanc@gmu.edu

October 27, 2019

Dear Dr. Genetin-Pilawa

Twenty years ago, I unexpectedly took a first step on a life path that would lead to amplifying history's most intentionally silenced voices so that millions of diverse people could finally listen worldwide. In 1999, four days after earning a Harvard doctoral degree in sociology, the emerging Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian invited me to join them in the role of the first Education Manager. We all knew that none of this development was ever supposed to have happened, according to well laid plans set a century prior, Native cultures had been expected to be fully erased. Yet there we were, there I was, fully conscious, academically rigorous, community accountable, and unswervingly committed to make a vastly untold history accessible to our public.

I greet you now in earnest and in good faith, to request that you consider me to join your faculty at George Mason University as an Associate Professor of Public History. I am inspired to seek this opportunity to uplift a new generation of public historians, as well as those students who would be enriched through its capacity to compel introspection on place and society. An intellectual community and venue that merges academic discipline with an openness to fresh methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches would also create a strong reciprocal site for my stage as a scholarly practitioner now ready to gather work for increased publication. The location of George Mason itself, in Virginia, has both the global connectivity and regional ties to tidewater cultures that mediate my lengthy career in public history as well as my own Piscataway tribal identity.

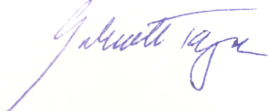
I am now extensively experienced in exhibition craft, public programs, and interpretive technique given decades of practice as evidenced in my c.v. The majority of my exhibitions and programs are paired with a digital component. I moved from the educator's role into curatorial work within my first three years at NMAI in order to push towards our museum's opening in 2004. In those first years, we all agreed to suspend our other scholarly endeavors save the responsibility at hand to co-create "the museum different." I mobilized my research capacities gained through careful training by my mentors to establish orality on a par with documents. At Harvard, I insisted on creating a methodology for developing social theory and historical reconstruction that gave equity to the classic written canon and to traditional knowledge carriers. At its foundation, my research, writing and production have always served to assist in the regeneration and validation of source communities while transmitting findings into the appropriate media. At NMAI, a museum geared to national interest as well as responsibility to a tribal hemispheric constituency, the language of interpretation must be accessible and open yet the heft sitting under an exhibit, program, digital product, or design choice contains massive repositories of archived research. We carried the weight of ancestors, marginalized communities, and fulfilled the promise made through hard won commissions. As I have come through a background tied deeply to indigenous human rights and grassroots social change, all of my production whether viewable to the annual 1.5 million physical visitors at NMAI, securely shared in secure location within tribal protocols, or extended into peer reviewed scholarly association panels maintains an ethic rooted in the process of just transformation.

Given the gravitational pull of NMAI and Smithsonian, I have been active in consulting with national and international public history projects by advising curators seeking resource relationships. I have exchanged expertise with cultural ministries and institutions throughout Latin America, Asia, the Pacific and Europe. I also maintained an advisor's role for Smithsonian fellows, interns, and curatorial residents generally through semester long but at times a full year long supervision. Specific historical commemoration such as that of the 400th anniversary of Jamestown led me to work on specific sites throughout Virginia as well as later at the Ashmolean at Oxford (I was invited to assist in the decoding of Powhatan's Mantle). I was active in the State Department's visiting cultural scholars program, helping to review and provide guidance to curators engaged in projects such as the Cambodia Killing Fields Museum, the Chanteek Borneo Indigenous Museum, the National Museum of Australia, and Guatemala's exhibition program that implemented the interracial dialogue sites for the Peace Accords – just to name a very few but illustrative variable examples. I sat on thesis committees for the University of the Arts. Although I kept my attention to museum work, I considered my students to be the public, while also teaching classes to university students. I have extensive experience presenting papers at academic conferences, and guest lecturing.

In 2017, I made a decision to further deepen my work on methodology appropriate to culturally aligned loci directly within indigenous communities when Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors invited me to support selected treasured indigenous women elders on their own collections. I thought of this process as a “fearless curation,” centered firmly within the self-determination of the knowledge holder and more peripherally to an external institution. I spent two years primarily in the women's places of identity and power, from ancient pueblo villages to Pacific mud flats to open prairies, soul diving with them to devise best practices for their knowledge materials. While some collections included paper, more involved memory, song, pottery, weaving, dance, language, hunting, plant gathering, and other non-written forms precious to heritage, worthy of unique modes of keeping. I currently have expanded my public history work as an investigator for the National Park Service in enlightening lesser known narratives in historic sites, presently focused on Lafayette Square and the Declaration of Independence, through a relationship with the Association for the Study of African American Life and. This role can be brought into a program of research and mentorship that relates not only to the indigenous historical work, but also to the stories and locations of women, Latinx (I am conversationally fluent in Spanish), African Americans, and LGBTQ+ in public history.

I greatly appreciate this chance to introduce myself to your committee. I am entirely motivated to bring the breadth and depth of my experience to your department through teaching, research, publication, and collegial collaborations. I would be proud to join you on the George Mason faculty. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns that you may have as the selection process moves ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gabrielle Tayac', written in a cursive style.

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