

# MUSEUM STUDIES PROGRAM

Winter 2020 Visiting Scholar

## Listening to Object Witnesses: Decolonizing Research in Museum Collections

**Margaret M. Bruchac**

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology  
University of Pennsylvania

How do Indigenous objects in museum collections speak to those who collect, curate, observe, and claim them? The observable materials and patterns of construction obviously reflect particular ecosystems, cultures, and technologies, but do these objects also retain memories of the artisans who created them? Do they wield more than just imagined meaning or distributed agency? In this talk, Dr. Bruchac discusses strategies for recovering object histories through material analyses, consultation, and critical re-assessments of imposed museological categories (e.g., art, artifact, utilitarian, etc.) that may have distanced objects from their origins and isolated them from others like themselves. Case histories will feature new research into iconic creations – such as a 17th century wooden war club embedded with re-purposed wampum beads, and a shell bead wampum belt with a single glass bead – that function as “object witnesses” to entangled colonial settler/Indigenous encounters. Through her practice of “reverse ethnography,” Bruchac will reveal how, in many cases, memories can be reawakened when otherwise mysterious objects are reconnected with the stories, ecosystems, knowledges, and communities that created them. Object histories can also be recovered by tracking the desires and actions of non-Indigenous curators and collectors who transported these objects and stories to physically and conceptually distant locales.

Dr. Margaret M. Bruchac is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, Coordinator of Native American and Indigenous Studies, and Associate Faculty in the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Her new book, “Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists,” was the winner of the 2018 Council for Museum Anthropology Book Award.

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**Tuesday, March 10 at 6:30 pm**

**UM Museum of Art, Helmut Stern Auditorium**



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