The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty

Amanda J Cobb. American Quarterly. College Park: Jun 2005.Vol. 57, Iss. 2; pg. 485, 23 pgs
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Document types: Feature
Publication title: American Quarterly. College Park: Jun 2005. Vol. 57, Iss. 2; pg. 485, 23 pgs
Source type: Periodical
ISSN/ISBN: 00030678
Text Word Count 7311

Abstract (Document Summary)

On Sep 4, 2004, more than twenty-five thousand Native Americans gathered together in the Washington Mall to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Here, Cobb features the NMAI as an exercise of native cultural sovereignty.

Full Text (7311 words)

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On September 21, 2004, more than twenty-five thousand Native Americans gathered together on the Washington Mall to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). As a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, I, too, participated in that moment, which was beautiful for so many reasons-because of the physical beauty of the NMAI building and grounds, because of the cultural significance and even sacred connotation of so many objects in the museum, because of the more than sixty-five thousand non-Native Americans who joined the celebrations, and because the sun came out that morning after a solid week of rain. The thousands of people present that day seemed to understand that the National Museum of the American Indian is more than just a museum. As NMAI Director, W. Richard West (Southern Cheyenne) reflected, "There was just this kind of power in the air for Native people. But somehow it was almost the same for non-Indians who were there. They sensed, lots of them, the sixty-five thousand who watched the procession, that there was something very fundamental going on that day."1

Even in 1989, when Congress passed Public Law 105-189 establishing a National Museum of the American Indian as part of the Smithsonian, those involved knew something fundamental was occurring. Introduced by Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawai'i and then Representative Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne) of Colorado, the bill significantly embodied the cultural resurgence that had been growing in Indian country for a number of years, a resurgence that took a more clearly limned shape and form and a stronger, more insistent voice in the public arena.2 This consciousness recognized and acknowledged, in the words of poet Simon Ortiz (Acoma), that "This America has been a burden of steel and mad death" but also saw, in the "flowers and new grass and . . . spring wind rising" a different future for Native peoples.3 This outpouring from Native Americans manifested itself in everything from the red power movement, to the growth of American Indian studies in the academe, to the renaissance of contemporary Native American art, literature, and film, to the emergence of tribal museums and cultural centers, to the upsurge in economic development and the increased exercise of tribal sovereignty in legal and political arenas. The congressional bill, which appropriated funds for three museum facilities-the Gustav Heye Center in New York City, the Cultural Resources

Center in Suitland, Maryland, and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.-was one of the many institutional changes wrought by Native cultural resurgence and revitalization and one of the most significant because it involved museums, which have served as powerful colonizing forces throughout Native America.

The NMAI as an Exercise of Native Cultural Sovereignty

As I walked through the NMAI, I was particularly struck by a display in Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories, one of the three permanent exhibitions. The installation consisted of long, curvilinear glass cases, one of which was filled to overflowing with guns, one with Bibles, and one with government treaties. The accompanying wall text argues that the three major forces of colonization were warfare, churches, and government, and through the display of literally hundreds of guns, Bibles, and treaties, the exhibit demonstrates how all three served as instruments of dispossession. But, the exhibit goes on to say that these same objects-in the hands of Native Americans-served also as instruments of resistance, resilience, and survival. Armies may have used guns and warfare to seize land and conquer tribes, but Native peoples used guns to protect their communities and fight back. Missionaries and schoolteachers may have used churches and Bibles to "civilize" Native individuals in their attempt to destroy elements of Native cultures, but Native Americans, in an exercise of profound cultural agency, either rejected the imposed religion or adapted elements of it into existing religious and spiritual traditions, using religion as a common thread to bind the community together. Government officials may have used treaties to forge alliances and force the cession of land, but Native nations learned to use these documents to fight for the continued federal recognition of their sovereign status.

An ironic and unspoken aspect of the display was striking; that is, that this argument was being made in a museum, an institutional tool of culture that quite possibly could serve as the fourth major force of colonization after guns, God, and government. I was therefore struck by the fact that in creating the NMAI, Native Americans have again turned an instrument of colonization and dispossession into something else-in this case, into an instrument of self-definition and cultural continuance.
Image
[Photograph]
Figure 1.
View of the guns and Bibles in "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories" exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.
Figure 2.
Sioux Bibles and hymnals with beaded and porcupine quill embroidered covers, North and South Dakota, ca. 1900., in "Our Peoples" exhibition.

It is well known to readers of this journal that Native Americans have a tortured relationship with museums. Museums offer significant bodies of scholarship and knowledge that cannot be discounted; nevertheless, museological practices are underpinned by Western epistemologies, systems of classification, and ideological assumptions that, when applied to Native Americans, have functioned in exploitative, objectifying, and demeaning ways. By using a historically unquestioned authority to take Native objects and remains and to define who and what Native Americans are, museums have, in many ways, trapped Native Americans behind their glassed-in cases, rendering vital, contemporary Native voices silent, dynamic Native cultures invisible, and abstract concepts of legal and cultural sovereignty difficult to exercise in meaningful ways. At the same time, however, many Native Americans care very deeply about museums because they hold Native remains, sacred objects, and objects of cultural heritage and patrimony. Native peoples care very deeply about the continued existence and appropriate care of these objects in spite of the often tragic ways in which they were acquired.

Since the repatriation movement of the 1980s and 1990s, however, museums have begun to acknowledge their power as institutional colonizers; as a result, museum theory and practice have made significant strides in revising the relationship between museums and Native Americans, particularly as Native individuals have entered the arena as curators. Significantly, the years since the passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act have seen the emergence of the "new muscology" as well as the development of a number of tribal museums and cultural centers. Based on actually incorporating criticism of museums into exhibitions, the new muscology throws the authority of museums into question, thus subtracting some, but by no means all, of their power.4 The simultaneous emergence of a number of tribal museums and cultural centers both contributed to and borrowed from the new museology and provided a place to test new museological methods. However, "indigenizing" the National Museum of the American Indian was a complicated project on a much grander scale-a project through which the NMAI carries forward the new museological paradigm in dramatic ways. After all, museums have served as one of the most compelling definers of Native Americans; the creation of the NMAI represented a major chance for Native peoples to redefine museums while defining themselves on an international stage.

Richard West, who was appointed NMAI director in 1990 and who worked in collaboration and consultation with NMAI staff and Native communities across the Americas, had a very clear sense of how to turn an instrument of dispossession into one of self-definition, thus truly making the National Museum of American Indians. Those involved in developing the museum's guiding principles knew that the museum should celebrate, protect, and support the living Native cultures of the Americas, not study, classify, or objectify them. They also knew that the museum should include Native peoples of North and South America, recognizing that the boundaries of contemporary nation-states in no way reflected tribal cultural boundaries. Furthermore, they knew that a museum of Americans developed by American Indians would never take 1492 as its historical beginning point; American Indian history since European contact is only small part of a much deeper history. In addition, they knew that their "views, voices, and eyes" should be woven into every facet of the museum, literally from the ground up. And, finally, they knew that a museum of and for American Indians should bring exhibitions to Indian country, thus establishing what is referred to as the "fourth museum." Each element of the museum, from the landscape to the building design to the exhibits, stems from these principles, all of which are based on Indigenous peoples' knowledge, core values, and definitions of themselves.5

In other words, every aspect of the museum, including its very purpose and function, had to be filtered through Native core cultural values and adapted accordingly. Consequently, the "something very fundamental" described by West was the recognition of the significance of the National Museum of the American Indian as an exercise of what filmmaker and scholar Beverly Singer (Santa Clara) calls "cultural sovereignty."6 Such exercise requires the use of traditions as a map for the future by making the "old ways" part of contemporary life. In the case of the NMAI, that means integrating the old ways and core cultural values and traditions into the very concept of what a museum is and can be-changing what has historically been a cabinet of curiosities into a community-centered gathering place for the celebration of living cultures.

It is true that the museum as a specific concept is foreign to Native peoples; however, caring for and cherishing cultural patrimony is not, regardless of commonly held scholarly views on that matter. Sadly, as Christina Kreps has noted, the assertion that "non-western people are not concerned with the collection, care, and preservation of their cultural property . . . has frequently been used to justify the collection (or some would say plunder) and retention of non-western people's cultural property in museums."7 Caring for cultural property is hardly a new idea for Native people, and indeed, may exist at the center of many cultures. Consequently, adapting the old ways to museums is not the same as adapting the old ways to a new or foreign idea. Instead, it is about adapting new and foreign methods of collection, care, and preservation to a very old idea. After all, as Robert Warrior (Osage) has written, "to understand what the 'real meaning' of traditional revitalization is, then, American Indians must realize that the power of those traditions is not in their formal superiority but in their adaptability to new challenges."8 Making a large-scale, national museum, such as the NMAI, into a "Native place" presented such a challenge.

Creating the NMAI

To create a museum truly based on the guiding principles discussed above, the NMAI developed an elaborate process of community collaboration and consultation, a process that marked each phase of development and decision making, from the design of the space, to the content and style of the exhibitions, to the choice of food in the cafeteria. Initially, rather than invite individual representatives of Native communities to travel to New York City or Washington, D.C., the NMAI staff chose to travel to Native communities, and during the early 1990s, the NMAI staff held dozens of community consultations at different sites in Indian Country. At each consultation, participants voiced their ideas for the building, landscape, and overall tone of the museum, going far beyond what was originally asked of them. The comments generated during those sessions were recorded and compiled into a landmark planning document titled The Way of the People, which continues to guide the NMAI in its plans for the future.9

An excellent example of applying the old ways to a contemporary challenge was the way in which the NMAI reconceptualized the idea of a museum as a space. Because the NMAI occupies the last available space on the National Mall, it ironically occupies the first space directly across from the Capitol. Consequently, the NMAI both symbolically and physically reclaims Washington, D.C., as Indian Country. The reclamation is made ever more apparent by the distinctive elements of the landscape surrounding the building and the building itself, both of which effectively demonstrate the conceptual link between the natural and built environments that is so central to most Native worldviews.

To remind all visitors to the Capitol that America-all of the Americas-was once and still is Indian country, the designers took great pains to re-create the local natural environment as it was before European contact. As a result, the museum grounds consist of four indigenous habitats, which are a home for more than thirty-three thousand plants of 150 different species. The specific habitats include: (1) a forest environment that includes such species as red maple, sumac, and white oak; (2) a wetlands environment, featuring wild rice and morel mushrooms; (3) a meadow environment in which sunflowers and panic grass can be found; and perhaps most significant, (4) a traditional croplands area in which the "three sisters"-beans, squash, and corn-are raised using Native agricultural methods.10

Other notable features of the landscape are the cardinal direction markers and the grandfather rocks. The cardinal direction markers, four large stones placed on the grounds along the north-south and east-west axes of the site, signify the Native peoples of the Americas and were brought from corresponding communities. For example, the northern stone is from the Northwest Territories, Canada; the southern from Punto Arenas, Chile; the eastern from Great Falls, Maryland; and the western from Hawai'i. Furthermore, the axes upon which the stones are placed intersect with markers inside the building at the center of the Potomac room, the huge circular space on the ground floor that represents the museum's heart. The grandfather rocks, large boulders that traveled from Alma, Canada, symbolize the "elders of the landscape." These more than forty uncarved rocks evoke the long relationship of Native peoples to place.11

In many ways, the museum building itself functions as part of the landscape. Stressing a relationship between natural and built environments, the curvilinear building-built of sand-colored limestone and occupying 250,000 square feet-stands in stark contrast to the white marble, straight lines, and sharp edges of the other monuments on the Washington Mall. The carved tiers of the five-story building resemble a jagged rock, smoothed and shaped over time by wind and water, a resemblance further enhanced by a waterfall featured in the northwest corner. At the same time, however, the structure's curved lines, tiers, and dome call to mind the very best of contemporary architecture, thus underscoring that Native cultures are both ancient and thoroughly present in the here and now.12

The craftsmanship and artistry that mark the museum's exterior pervade the interior, making the entire space function as a sort of exhibition in and of itself. For example, while visitors can rind exquisite examples of contemporary Native art in Native Modernism, a retrospective of the work of George Morrison (Chippewa) and Allan Houser (Chiricahua), they can also find superb examples in the basketry-inspired wall of woven copper that encircles the Potomac room, or in the adzed wood of the museum stores. The natural color palette and textures throughout the museum were taken from plants and animals of special significance to Native peoples, for example, corn, beans, squash, and salmon. Abstractions from astronomy and specific celestial references are themes found time and again throughout the museum, including the floor of the Potomac, the oculus in the Potomac dome, and the eight glass prisms on the south wall designed to let light enter on certain days, at certain times, and in certain seasons. Such particularized design elements were considered in every detail of the museum, from the curved lines (supposedly, there is only one right angle in the entire structure) to the elevator doors, which feature bird motifs and cardinal direction markers.13
Image
[Photograph]
Figure 3.
View of East Entrance of the National Museum of the American Indian.

The attention to design and detail, both inside and on the grounds, is one way the NMAI reconceptualizes space in its reconceptualization of the entire museum project, making this museum more of a living gathering place than a repository for cultural property. Organizing the content of the museum, however, further challenged the NMAI to engage more fully and broadly in the exercise of cultural sovereignty. To turn the museum from an instrument of dispossession into an instrument of self-definition, the NMAI aggressively carried forward propositions first tested in smaller tribal museums and cultural centers as well as in the Heye Center of New York, which opened in 1994.

First, the NMAI is based on the proposition that a museum-as-gathering-place or a museum-as-cultural-center must consist of more than exhibitions. In other words, a place that celebrates and contributes to the continuance of living cultures must make space for living cultures. To that end, the NMAI provides a welcome wall that includes greetings in hundreds of Native languages, a special place in the Potomac for dancing, performing, and demonstrations, as well as designated spaces for conferences and special programming. For example, the NMAI houses a Main Theater for musicians, theater companies, film festivals, and storytellers, as well as the Lelawi Preparatory Theater and a Resource Center, which is open seven days a week and offers a library, an interactive learning center with eighteen public access computers, and a technologically equipped classroom. Virtual and traveling exhibitions, which make up the "fourth museum," emphasize that the NMAI is a space that living Native cultures can access whether or not they are able to travel to Washington, D.C.

Furthermore, the Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe (Piscataway for "Let's Eat"), which takes up a substantial portion of the first floor, offers Native foods, prepared using traditional techniques, from five geographic regions. For example, visitors might sample tamales from South America, buffalo burgers from the Great Plains, enchiladas from Meso America, salmon from the Northwest Coast, and succotash from the Northern Woodlands. All of these features-in particular the welcome wall, fourth museum, and restaurant-emphasize community and hospitality, which are important Indigenous values across the Americas, and contribute to the NMAI's mission as a place of contemporary cultural continuance.14

Second, the NMAI is based on the proposition that while museums have objects and exhibitions, those objects and exhibitions must be curated collaboratively with the Native peoples they seek to represent. As a result of such collaborative curation, the museum employs "nontraditional" (by museological standards) methods of care and preservation, display, and classification, and privileges Native conceptualizations of history and truth. This framework was established early on in the consultation process and carried throughout the NMAFs development.

Consequently, the Cultural Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland, one of the primary storage facilities for the massive collection, became the center of NMAI's object care and preservation efforts. Those efforts relied on "traditional care" techniques, which were developed by the NMAI and other tribal museums since NAGPRA. These techniques are based on the belief that many cultural objects are alive rather than inanimate and often require curators to allow them to "breathe" rather than suffocate in sealed plastic containers, to move or store objects so that they are facing a particular direction, and to provide tribal citizens with the ability to visit their objects and to "feed" them, often with pollen, or perform ceremonies with them. Many museums, tribal and nontribal have integrated these techniques into the curation of their collections in recent years, though certainly not on such a grand scale as the NMAI has done.15

Traditional care highlights the fact that Native peoples care deeply about their cultural property-just as Eurocentric museums do-but not always for the same reasons. While Western muscology is concerned with an object's "physical integrity and attributes as evidence of cultural, historical, or scientific phenomena," Native traditional care is concerned with an object's spiritual integrity and meaning and function within its community.16 The integration of these methods in non-Native museums indicates the extent to which muscology is willing to change its relationship with Native peoples and the ways in which the NMAI has served and continues to serve as a role model for other institutions.

To carry forward the second proposition of community collaboration in exhibition development, the NMAI developed an elaborate protocol of community-curation. During the consultation process, Native community members stressed that no one discipline-for example, history, anthropology, or art-provided the necessary knowledge base required for self-definition. Instead, these individuals suggested that elements of those disciplines be incorporated into Native ways of knowing based on Native resources, including oral traditions, elders, and spiritual leaders.17 The core thematic content of the three permanent exhibitions, Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World, Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories, and Our Lives: Contemporary Lives and Identities, is based on this principle.

Each of the three permanent exhibitions is characterized by Native points of view and takes as its focus a specific theme developed through the early consultation process. Each exhibition is displayed on a curvilinear model, consistent with the building's overall design. Each consists of a "spine" or center installation, developed by NMAI curators, that offers an explanation and analysis of that exhibition's theme. The function of the spine is to share an experience or worldview common to the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Eight circular, community-curated installations surround each spine. In these installations, a specific Native nation narrates the ways in which its community has experienced or understands a given theme. Thus, the combination of the spine and community-curated installations demonstrates that the Native peoples of the Americas share some common values, worldviews, and experiences, but remain culturally distinctive and diverse.

To create the community-curated installations, the NMAI first invited twenty-four Native communities, representative of geographic region, to participate. After the communities had accepted, NMAI curatorial staff traveled to each community to discuss the project and process. Then, each tribal community delegated members to serve as community-curators who traveled to the NMAI to view all of the NMAI's holdings of that community's objects and to work with NMAI curators to decide how to use those objects within a given exhibition's theme. As a result, each community-curated installation makes use of interdisciplinary and inventive methods of exhibition and organizational structures.18

Few visitors will be very familiar with the interdisciplinary nature of the exhibitions. Historically, Native American exhibits have been firmly curated within the disciplinary boundaries of particular types of institutions, for example, art museums, anthropological museums, or history museums, the latter being the most pervasive and accessible, as they flourish in large cities and small towns throughout the country. According to James Nason, the most common exhibition styles with regard to Native Americans include: (1) the geographical exhibit, in which objects are grouped by region or specific cultural affiliation, giving visitors the chance to "tour" the exhibit as they would on vacation in another country; (2) the history-period display, which categorizes objects chronologically, thereby showing the "development" or "evolution" of Native peoples as they "progress" toward a Western perception of civilization; (3) the habitat exhibit, which frequently consists of dioramas designed to allow visitors a glimpse into a way of life in a particular moment; and (4) the open-storage display in which visitors are shown as many objects as possible regardless of the object's region, age, or other disciplinary criterion. Overwhelmingly, these exhibition styles emphasize Native Americans as peoples of a distant past, and this is particularly true of dioramas, which quite literally "freeze" Native people in a particular moment in time. Furthermore, all four of the styles tend to establish Native American peoples as "other" and frequently, whether intentionally or not, as exotic and/or inferior.19

The NMAI, whose professional curators have likely all had some sort of specific disciplinary training, have stressed that strict disciplinary approaches have brought important knowledge to bear, but that no single discipline has offered the multiple perspectives required to fully share Native worldviews and bodies of knowledge. Such worldviews and knowledge bases tend to emphasize connection, not disjuncture, among knowledges. Because NMAI and community-curators wanted to emphasize the distinctiveness of individual Native cultures as well as cultural dynamism, they worked in tandem to create exhibitions that demonstrated community specificity and community vitality.

The twenty-four community-curated installations make use of historical objects, contemporary art and cultural production, wall text, video and/or audio features, photographs, and interactive features, as well as materials, fabrics, textures, colors, and built mock-ups or structures (but woidioramas) meant to describe a way of life or evoke a particular response. The community-curated installations do not offer the revisionist, "this is the story you were told; this is our version of the story" lessons many visitors might expect. As a matter of fact, the installations do not offer narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and ends at all. Instead, the selected objects, text, photographs, and so on, work together to form an image or collage that, ultimately, becomes an elaborate self-portrait.

Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World concentrates on Native cosmology and the relationship Native peoples have with the natural world, thus spotlighting Native philosophical worldviews and the time depth of Native cultures. The installations in Our Universes follow the path of one solar year and demonstrate the ways in which ceremonies and seasonal celebrations were developed and are shaped by the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. Moving through a solar year, each of the eight community-curated installations demonstrates how that principle is manifested in a particular tribal experience in a particular season and offers that community's symbols and interpretation of the order of the world. The eight communities include: the Pueblo of Santa Clara (New Mexico), the Anishinaabe (Canada), the Lakota (South Dakota), the Quechua (Peru), the Hupa (California), the Q'eq'chi' Maya (Guatemala), the Mapuche (Chile), and the Yup'ik (Alaska). The spine of the exhibit encapsulates the communities' emphasis on the ancient bodies of knowledge and wisdom, maintained in oral traditions that continue to inform Native cultures today, and the balanced relationship of humans and the natural world.

Special features include abstractions of celestial references on the ceiling and walls, as well as examples of ancestral Native teachings, including an extended video of aTlingit story, "How Raven Steals the Sun," which is accompanied by an exquisite blown and sand-carved glass piece by Preston Singletary (Tlingit), symbolizing the raven. The installations include descriptions and photographs of seasonal celebrations, such as the Day of the Dead, to illustrate the ways in which ancient knowledge continues to inform contemporary daily life.
Image
[Photograph]
Figure 4.
"Raven Steals the Sun," blown glass by Preston Singletary (Tlingit), Seattle, . Washington, 2003, in "Our Universes" exhibition. Photo by Ernesto Amoroso, copyright Smithsonian Institution/ National Museum of the American Indian.

Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories centers on Native peoples' experiences resulting from European contact, highlighting survivance strategies in the face of colonizing forces. The eight communities-the Seminole (Florida), Kiowa (Oklahoma), Tohono O'odham (Arizona), Eastern Band of Cherokee (North Carolina), Nahua (Mexico), Ka apor (Brazil), and Wixarika, or Huichol (Mexico)-describe the last five hundred years since European contact from each community's own point of view. This particularly moving exhibition examines how European contact changed the world. The spine of the exhibit describes the effects of European contact on Native peoples using the metaphor of a hurricane and focuses not solely on the devastation wrought by the hurricane, but the methods Native peoples used for cultural survivance. The exhibition explicitly asks visitors to consider history-what it is, who writes it, and how the writing of it affects our lives.

This exhibition has several particularly notable features in addition to the guns, churches, and government installation described earlier. For example, one large wall, inscribed with the name of every known Native nation in the Americas, simply, yet eloquently, bears witness to Native survivance. Another highlight is the "Storm" installation, which consists of curvilinear walls arranged in a circle. Each wall is made up entirely of blue video screens, some of which depict a hurricane impacting a coastline. Visitors hear the hurricane in the background, and every few minutes, a voice-over describes European contact, using the storm as a metaphor. This installation is made especially effective by the fact that visitors are forced to stand in the center of the storm, with no place to sit, which evokes a feeling of helplessness and inevitability, making the emphasis on survivance strategies all the more powerful.

Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities focuses on present-day individual and communal identity issues, examining both imposed and self-determined identities by emphasizing language, place, and legal policies. In this installation the eight communities-the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians (California), the urban Indian community of Chicago (Illinois), the Yakama Nation (Washington State), the Igloolik (Canada), the Kahnawake (Canada), the Saint-Laurent Metis (Canada), the Kalinago (Carib Territory, Dominica), and the Pamunkey Tribe (Virginia)-

accentuate the hard but deliberate choices they have made when challenged by very often harsh realities marked by poverty and social dysfunction that affect their identities, as individuals and communities. The spine of the exhibition directly asks visitors, Who is Indian? and, What does it mean to be Indian? by explicitly calling into question preconceived notions of authenticity and racial purity as well as popular and abidingly destructive stereotypes.

Our Lives, as the exhibition with the most overtly contemporary focus, plays with exhibition style somewhat more than the other permanent exhibitions. Highlights of Our Lives include a wall of dozens and dozens of individual photographs of the faces of Native Americans, of every imaginable age and phenotype, a glassed-in case displaying objects that symbolize the red power movement, such as an original copy of Vine Deloria's Custer Died for Your Sins, many pieces of contemporary Native art, and even a mock-up of the urban Indian center in Chicago.

In addition to the three main exhibitions, the NMAI's current installations include: (1) Who We Are, a multimedia, preparatory film experience showing inside the circular Lelawi Theater; (2) The Jewelry of Ben Nighthorse on display in a gallery that will later be used as a gathering or conference space for Native Americans on business in Washington, D.C.; (3) a major retrospective, Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser, on display until the fall of 2005 in the changing exhibitions gallery; and (4) Window on Collections, glass-fronted cases featuring more than three thousand items from the NMAI collection, arranged by the following thematic groups: arrowheads, dolls, beads, peace medals, objects featuring animals, and containers.

The celebratory attitude of the twenty-five thousand Native Americans who traveled from as far north as Alaska and as far south as Chile to attend the opening ceremony and First Americans Festival underscores that no one understands the significance of the NMAI as a monument to and symbol of the survivance of Native peoples better than Native peoples themselves. For the National Museum of the American Indian to be o/American Indians and for American Indians, the NMAI had to fundamentally alter what museums have always meant to Native people in every way, and in this, the NMAI succeeded.

The display of guns, Bibles, and treaties in the Our Peoples exhibition pow-! erfully demonstrates that objects are imbued with their meaning by the community and context in which they are used. The traditional care techniques employed by NMAI curators make the same point-it is not the object itself, but the community's use of an object that lends it its significance. To turn guns, Bibles, treaties, and museums from instruments of dispossession into instruments of resistance, resilience, survival, and self-definition, Native peoples did not inherently change the object; instead, they changed its use, which made all the difference. By focusing on use or process over object or product in its own form and function, the NMAI highlights the vitality and dynamism of Native peoples-agents engaged in acts of self-definition and cultural sovereignty, living cultures modeling the survivance strategies that have enabled their cultural continuance. For Native Americans, the National Museum of the American Indian not only announces, "We Are Still Here," but it also demonstrates the process that made this fact possible.
Image
[Photograph]
Figure 5.

Kiowa Ah-Day beaded sneakers by I'eri Orecves (Kio\va), Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2004, in "Our Lives" exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian. Photo by Walter Larrimore, copyright Smithsonian Institution/ National Museum of the American Indian.
Figure 6.
View of "Native Modernism" exhibition, National Museum of the American Indian, 2004.

Image
[Photograph]
Figure 7.
Gallery view, "Native Modernism" exhibition, National Museum of the American Indian, 2004.

By Native criteria, the NMAI is by and large successful. Much of the early criticism of the content of the museum from specific Native communities centered not on the design of the grounds or building or on the community-curated installations, but on the extent to which that community was able to find its own representation and cultural objects. That individual community-representation was the chief criticism, given the tremendous number of Native communities in North and South America, suggests that, for Native audiences, the NMAI probably succeeded in many other ways, including its overall mission to serve as a forum for living cultures. Early non-Native responses, on the other hand, were not as generous.

The NMAI and Non-Native Responses

Museum critics, like the 4 million visitors the NMAI is expecting each year, who may not understand or appreciate the museum's significance as a practice of cultural sovereignty, judge it by very different standards. For example, the criteria by which critics judge the museum were made explicit in the early reviews published in the New York Times and the Washington Post. Those reviews were predominantly characterized by confusion, disappointment, and a sense of failed expectations. Edward Rothstein of the Times and Paul Richard and Marc Fisher of the Post, in particular, found much to critique; they specifically alleged a lack of "scholarship," or "crisp lessons" in the exhibits. According to Rothstein, "The notion that tribal voices should 'be heard' becomes a problem when the selected voices have so little to say."20 He continues by noting that the museum "seems satisfied with serving a sociological function . . . Understanding ... is not a matter of whose voice is heard ... [I] t is a matter of scholarship."21 Fisher, in a similar vein, declares that "the Smithsonian accepted the trendy faux-selflessness of today's historians and let the Indians present themselves as they wish to be seen"22 (emphasis added). Richard continues this line of criticism, stating that "the museum doesn't nourish thought," that "the exhibitions are a blur," "the labeling is awful," and because the museum is neither "an art museum" nor "a history museum" that it is ahistorical.23

Clearly all three of these critics begin their critiques from the assumptions that museums consist of exhibitions and that exhibitions must meet the standards of discrete disciplines and must teach crisp, cleanly labeled lessons-assumptions that are based on years of experience with Western museums and academic disciplines. Rothstein indicates that the narratives told in tribal voices get in the way of scholarship or meaning, demonstrating that he does not consider Native bodies of knowledge valid or equal to Western bodies of knowledge. Furthermore, his assertion that it does not matter "whose voice is heard" suggests that, for him, identity does not equal knowledge.

Identity may not equal knowledge, but Rothstein's knowledge of museums certainly does not equal insight into the processes at work in the National Museum of the American Indian. Perhaps most patronizing, Fisher's comment that historians "let" the Indians tell their own stories, signals that (1) there are no Native American historians, and (2) the privileging of tribal voices is an example of irresponsible scholarship. Finally, Richard's claim that the NMAI is "ahistorical" invalidates the Native versions of history and truth the Our Peoples exhibit asks visitors to consider and question.

For critics like Rothstein, Richard, and Fisher, the NMAI fails because it does not adhere to long-standing Western museological standards. It does not seem to matter to these critics that those museological standards have exploited and objectified Native Americans in very specific ways. Nor does it seem to matter to these critics that the NMAI telegraphed its intentions to be a "museum different" for years prior to the museum opening. The critics judged the NMAI based on the purpose they wanted it to serve rather than the purpose it serves. The perceived "avoidance of scholarship" noted by Rothstein is particularly interesting because the NMAI may well be among the most heavily and self-consciously theorized museums in existence. However, the theorizing, which is based on a combination of Native worldviews and postmodernity, led away from the more standard and much more familiar forms of display and organization and toward a dialogic system that demands the critical engagement and interpretation of its visitors. Rothstein seemingly failed to recognize the new system and the theoretical foundations on which it is based. Rothstein argues that museums should offer lessons for visitors to learn. His resistance to, or lack of recognition of, the NMAFs mission, theory, and organizational system indicate that he may not be as interested in learning something new as he is in validating his own knowledge.

That these critics do not recognize the theory and scholarship at work in the NMAI, much less the symbolic importance of the entire project, is maddeningly disappointing and in many ways outright infuriating. Nonetheless, all three make an important point: many visitors will find the new museological paradigm at work in the exhibitions unfamiliar and confusing. The unfamiliarity of the narrative structure and classification system in combination with stereotypical (and sadly racist) imaginings about Native Americans will inevitably lead to a certain amount of disappointment on the part of some visitors.

Although the interdisciplinary organizational structure may be difficult for some visitors, it is not beyond comprehension. West, for example, suggests that visitors approach a given exhibition as they would an impressionist painting, directing visitors not to search for the meaning in each object or swirl of paint but to step back and see how the objects function together to complete the picture.24

Literary scholar Elizabeth Archuleta (Yaqui) uses a quote from writer Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) to explain the epistemology that underpins the NMAJ exhibitions:

For those of you accustomed to a structure that moves from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow because the structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web-with many little threads radiating from a center, crisscrossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made.25

Archuleta uses this quote to describe her own interpretation of the exhibits, stating, "Rather than structure the exhibits in a way that guides visitors and 'teaches' them about Indians, leading them from point A to point B to point C, museum curators structured them like the 'many little threads' of a spider web with each strand adding to the larger picture." She goes on to say that this organizational strategy requires visitors to "set aside notions they previously held about museums and Indians, 'listen' to the stories being told in the exhibits, and trust that meaning will be made if they become involved in the storytelling process."26

Unfortunately for the NMAI, few visitors are likely to understand the level of dialogic interaction that is expected of them, and those who do may be resistant to "trusting" that meaning will be made. Furthermore, visitors steeped in Hollywood stereotypes may not realize that they have something new to learn. In fact, as I walked through the NMAI, I asked the "guest consultants" working the floor what question visitors asked them the most. The answer? "Where are the teepees?"

The NMAI should not attempt to offset visitor frustration by reverting to the more familiar exhibition styles; to do so would be tantamount to calling the entire project-a project so significant to cultural sovereignty and continuance-a failure. Instead, I recommend that the NMAI find ways (perhaps through audio or video) to prepare visitors for what they will experience, letting them know that they will be asked to "read" differently and asking them to rise to the occasion. Making such a strategy available is crucial, not only because 99 percent of the 4 million expected visitors a year will be non-Native and it would be good for business, but also because the entire NMAI project provides an important opportunity for Native and non-Native Americans. American museums, and especially the Smithsonian museums, aggressively promote an American national identity. For Native Americans, the NMAI-a Smithsonian institution-promotes Native American national identities. For non-Native Americans, the NMAI provides a real chance to consider what those national identities mean in the context of American identity. As Richard West so movingly stated in his remarks at the opening ceremony, Native Americans "remain a part of the cultural future of the Americas, just as we were a part of its past and fought so hard to be a part of its present"; and because of that, the NMAI opens up the possibility for "the true cultural reconciliation that until now has eluded American history."27
[Footnote]
Notes

Several paragraphs of this review will also appear in the American Indian Quarterly by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. © 2005 by the University of Nebraska Press.

1. W. Richard West, interviewed by Amanda J. Cobb, January 14, 2005.
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