
The National Museum of the American Indian: Sharing the Gift

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The National Museum of the American Indian

Sharing the Gift

AMANDA J. COBB

We have lived in these lands and sacred places for thousands of years. We thus are the original part of the cultural heritage of every person hearing these words today, whether you are Native or non-Native. We have felt the cruel and destructive edge of the colonialism that followed contact and lasted for hundreds of years. But, in our minds and in history, we are not its victims. As the Mohawks have counseled us, “It is hard to see the future with tears in your eyes.”

W. Richard West, NMAI Opening Ceremony

BEGINNINGS

Over twenty-five thousand American Indians from over five hundred Indigenous nations journeyed from their homes to the National Mall in Washington DC to witness the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) on September 25, 2005. They journeyed to participate in the largest gathering of Native peoples in modern history, to celebrate a symbolic moment in the long, long histories of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and to honor their own survivance. As a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, I too traveled from my current home in New Mexico to Washington DC—a place Native Americans have journeyed to often, a place we have come to know a little too well, a place we had almost forgotten was Indian Country once, is Indian Country *still*. But at the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian, a Native place, we were reminded.

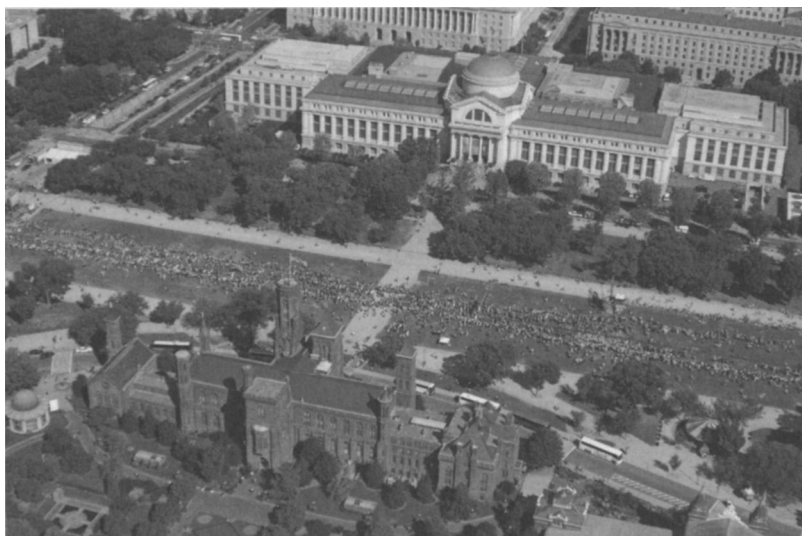


FIGURE 1. Native Nations Procession Aerial View. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall, Washington DC, September 21, 2005.

It was a day for acknowledging and considering journeys. Indigenous Americans from as far north as Alaska and as far south as Chile traveled to Washington DC, reminding us that Native Americans have long journeyed to places up and down the Western hemisphere and that the current boundaries of nation-states have never been our cultural boundaries. The words of NMAI director W. Richard West (Southern Cheyenne), quoted above, reminded us of our journey from pre-contact through colonization to cultural revitalization—a journey of cultural continuance and survivance. Finally, on the day of the NMAI opening, the participants of the Native Nations Procession made another journey, walking past the Smithsonian’s Natural History Museum to the National Museum of the American Indian—a very short journey a very long time in coming.

THE JOURNEY TO A NATIVE PLACE

The significance of the path of the procession was not lost. After all, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History is *the* museum, the paragon of all that museums have meant to Native peoples and to those

people who have collected, named, studied, and displayed Native Americans and their cultures. For Native people there is nothing *natural* about natural history museums. Museums have long been understood as buildings that house collections—collections of art, scientific specimens, or other artifacts or objects considered to be of permanent value because of their rarity, uniqueness, and so on—for display. Because Native Americans have long been understood by collectors as scientific specimens, as *objects* of permanent value because of their rarity, uniqueness, and so on, Native remains and artifacts have been housed in museums, frequently in natural history museums, and displayed—dinosaurs to the left, Indians to the right.

As colonizing forces in the Americas, museums cannot be underestimated. Historically, through the research, study, and systematic collection of Native remains and artifacts, museums have objectified Native Americans, believing them to be a vanishing race of primitive people. This practice, which developed and continued in the United States during through the formative years of the new republic, has deeply impacted both Native and non-Native Americans in several significant ways. Museological systems contributed to the establishment of strict boundaries between Native and non-Native cultures, which resulted in a hierarchical relationship perhaps best characterized by binaries—researcher/subject, civilized/primitive, dynamic/static, normal/exotic, and so forth—ironically making those who were foreign to the Americas seem “native” and those who were native to the Americas seem “foreign.” Museums became, in many ways, one of the ultimate definers. As NMAI curators Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) and Gabrielle Tayac (Piscataway) aptly state, “Defining what Native Americans are became an obsession that lasted for centuries . . . Unlike most people, we have . . . had identities imposed on us.”¹

Furthermore, these “imposed identities” have all too frequently been nineteenth-century identities, which serve to freeze Native peoples in a particular historical moment, denying the dynamism and vitality so much a part of Native cultures. Such imposed identities have had tremendous psychological as well as material consequences. This persistent obsession to define Native Americans, which is manifested in everything from museums to movies to mascots, continues to impact federal policy directly and thus the ability of tribal nations to exercise their inherent sovereignty, making cultural continuance that much harder.

Significantly, the practice of defining has not been without conse-

quence for the definer, as it is impossible for one culture to define an “other” culture without at the same time defining itself. Because non-Natives have characterized Native Americans negatively in order to see themselves positively, non-Natives have not only immeasurably hurt Native peoples but have hurt themselves by failing to acknowledge, understand, or accept the abundance of gifts Native peoples have to share as living, active participants who contribute to the larger culture as well as maintaining their own. Consequently, museums have, by and large, served as places for non-Natives to observe Native peoples (frozen in time) rather than places for non-Natives to interact with and establish meaningful relationships with living, dynamic Native peoples—relationships that might tear down the damaging hierarchical boundaries of the past and benefit the cultures of both.

It is important to note that in spite of the role museums have historically played and continue to play, and in spite of a very real anger and bitterness that Native Americans harbor for them, Native peoples, at the same time, love and value museums for no less than the reason we hate them—for the simple fact that, as Rick West so succinctly stated, “they have our stuff.”² Since the repatriation movement of the 1980s and 1990s, however, it is true that museums have begun to acknowledge their power as institutional colonizers; as a result, museum theory and practice has made significant strides in revising its relationship with Native peoples, particularly as Native individuals have entered the arena as curators themselves. Significantly, the years since the passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act have seen the emergence of what has been called the “new museology.” Based on actually incorporating criticism of museums into exhibitions, the new museology throws the authority of museums into question, thus subtracting some, but by no means all, of their power.³ However, even with the development of the new museology, a paradigm dramatically carried forward by the NMAI, “Indigenizing” the National Museum of the American Indian was a complicated project that called for a complete redefinition of what a large scale, national museum is and can be.

And so, on September 21, 2004, when the twenty-five thousand participants in the Native Nations Procession walked the short distance between the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian, they made a very long journey in-

deed—a journey away from an old paradigm and toward a new one, a journey to a place designed by Natives to celebrate living Native cultures, a journey to a place that actually provoked a former trustee of a prominent American art museum to remark, “I don’t like this museum. This museum is NOT for collectors. There’s something else going on in here.”⁴ Ironically, that is the point.

GIVING GIFTS

As a museum, it celebrates, which often have not been known or understood, the truly great cultural accomplishments of the Native peoples of the Americas long before others came. It also insists that Native communities and cultures are very much alive, if often challenged by hard circumstances, throughout the hemisphere. It uses the voices of Native peoples themselves in telling the histories and stories of Native America, past and present.⁵

In these words from the opening ceremony, West describes what the National Museum of the American Indian is now—what it became after years and years of conversation, collaboration, planning, and hard work. From just these few sentences, we can discern how very distinctive, how very unique the NMAI is because we are so very familiar with what it could have been. How did such a place come into being? What events drove the creation of the museum? Or, more significantly, *who* drove the creation of the museum? The name, the National Museum of the American Indian, tells us that the NMAI is *of* the Indians of the Americas but does not answer another significant question: Who is the NMAI *for*?

The National Museum of the American Indian was established in 1989 with passage of Public Law 101-185, a bill introduced and sponsored by Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne), who was a Congressman at that time, and Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii.⁶ When Richard West was appointed director in June 1990, work on the NMAI began in earnest. Creating a guiding vision for the museum posed a significant challenge, given the historical context of Native peoples and museums and given that museums are conceptually foreign to Native cultures. Ultimately, the shaping of the NMAI was based on several guiding principles, of which the most significant include the following: 1) the mu-

seum would be international rather than U.S. specific, recognizing that current political boundaries are not cultural boundaries; 2) the museum would serve as a “forum” in which living Native cultures could share with one another as well as with non-Native groups; 3) the museum would recognize the immense time span, or “time depth,” of Native peoples in this hemisphere, of which the period since European contact is only a small part; 4) the museum would recognize the authentic and authoritative voices of Native peoples by bringing to bear their “views, voices, and sets of eyes” through collaborative consultation and curation; 5) the museum would have a unique responsibility to protect and support the continuance of Native cultures and communities; and 6) the museum would develop methods by which to bring the resources of the institution to Indian Country.⁷

These guiding principles are significant for several reasons. First, that the museum is international in scope enhances the meaning of the name of the institution, allowing for us to interpret the “National Museum of the American Indian” as a museum of the many Native nations of the Americas, recognizing cultural relationships rather than political separations and underscoring sovereignty and nationhood. That the NMAI celebrates living cultures and provides a forum for the sharing of cultures in effect redefines the way non-Natives have historically understood the term “museum” altogether.

The recognition and emphasis of the immense time depth of Native cultures shaped the content of the museum. By focusing on time depth and the concept of a long-standing cultural continuance, the NMAI elected to make contact and colonization only a small part of the much longer story of survivance; colonization is *not* the entire story. The fourth principle, recognizing the authenticity and authority of Native peoples, emphasized indigeneity as contemporary and led to a marked change in the curatorial process. In order to rely on the voices, views, and eyes of Native peoples, the NMAI established a complex methodology based on consultation and community curation, a collaborative process in which professional curators and Native community members work together, through which all installations were created. The NMAI’s special responsibility to contribute to the continuance of Native communities led to innovations in the museum’s programming. Conceiving of the NMAI as a forum or gathering place for living cultures dedicated to continuance allowed for the development of programs such as live demonstrations,

performances, readings, lectures, and film screenings, as well as the creation of the resource center and library inside the NMAI.

Finally, the significance of the sixth principle is particularly notable. The NMAI recognized that only a very small percentage of people in Indian Country would ever be able to visit the NMAI in Washington DC or either of the two other NMAI facilities—the Gustav Heye Center in New York City or the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland. Therefore, the NMAI developed the concept of a “fourth museum,” that is, exhibits and resources that travel to Native communities in Indian Country.⁸

For Native peoples, the NMAI has special significance, both symbolically and materially. Symbolically, the museum was expressly designed to celebrate—not to observe, study, or judge but to *celebrate*—the cultures of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. To celebrate these cultures connotes an understanding of the distinctiveness of Native cultures and affirms their authenticity and validity as ways of being in the world. Furthermore, to celebrate the cultures of the Indigenous peoples connotes an understanding of *peopleness* or nationhood, highlighting and emphasizing legal and cultural sovereignty.

It is also important to note that the NMAI in its place at the head of the National Mall not only symbolically represents the reclamation of Indian land but very specifically and literally *reclaims* that land. The NMAI does not rest on a slab of concrete or marble surrounded by the generically pretty and well-manicured flower beds so common in Washington DC; instead, the NMAI is surrounded by a natural landscape—complete with a forest environment, wetlands, grandfather rocks, and growing crops of corn, beans, and squash—designed to recreate what Indian Country what looked like before European contact and the development of the U.S. capital city.

Because the NMAI owns over 800,000 Native objects and artifacts, the NMAI is, both symbolically and materially, a home, or foster home, for those pieces, many of which are sacred to their cultures. As Rick West explains,

museums as a concept are utterly foreign to Native people. . . . all of these things that we create have always been part of a daily mix of life—they are not hung on the wall to be seen by crowds of people . . . in that way, museums will always be artificial spaces in some way. But what you can do . . . is to try to connect them in very

direct ways with the Native communities who actually created the material.⁹

The NMAI has taken the aspiration described by West very seriously, providing places both on the NMAI grounds and in the Cultural Resource Center in Maryland for Native people to come and visit their objects or have ceremonies with them. Furthermore, NMAI staff members spend a great deal of energy on “traditional care,” that is, attending to the ways in which objects are treated and stored, striving for cultural appropriateness and bearing in mind that many of these “objects” are truly considered to be living thing within their cultures and by their creators.¹⁰

Finally, the NMAI gives expression to Native voices and in fact becomes a Native voice in and of itself. This giving voice is both symbolic, restoring voice to peoples who have been constrained and silenced time after time, and literal, each exhibit, installation, and object has something particular to say to both Natives and non-Natives. The protocol or methodology of community curation, which breaks new ground by carrying forward the principles of new museology on such a grand scale, is not only significant because it gives expression to Native voices but also because it enacts a decolonizing methodology that will deeply impact the standards to which museums and curators are held. By employing this process prominently and extensively throughout such a significant museum, the NMAI has thrown a stone into the water, the rings of which will expand throughout the museum world.¹¹

All of these examples demonstrate the ways in which the NMAI is a Native place, where the symbolic and the material meet. Although the NMAI was officially created by an act of Congress, it was truly created by the groundswell of support in Indian Country, which manifested itself in tribal cultural revitalization movements; the Red Power movement; NAGPRA, the development of Native American studies as an academic discipline; the production of Native art, literature, film, and music; and countless other ways. The legislation was sponsored by two Native members of Congress but driven by the desires and needs of Native peoples to recognize one another and be recognized, by the desires and needs for a place to gather, celebrate, and share. The NMAI may be *of* American Indians, but who is it *for*? In many ways, the NMAI is a lovely gift—a gift to Native peoples from Native peoples in celebration of Native peoples.

Although creating the guiding vision for the museum was difficult in and of itself, creating a landscape, building, and exhibits that lived up to such a grand vision proved to be a far greater challenge with even more complexities. Because creating a “Native place” required the participation of Native peoples, the first and most important stage of the planning process was consultation. Rather than inviting individual representatives of Native communities to travel to New York City or Washington DC, the NMAI staff chose to travel to Native communities, and in 1990 preliminary consultative sessions were held in Sulphur, Oklahoma, and Warm Springs, Oregon. 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,” a document that continues to guide the NMAI in its plans.¹²

Throughout the consultative process, participants commented on the idea of physical place as a value common to Indigenous peoples throughout the hemisphere. Consequently, they insisted that the location of the museum building—the grounds themselves—should be a part of the Native place they were creating. As a result the landscape around the building functions as an extension of the building itself, highlighting the relationship between built and natural environments so integral to Indigenous worldviews. Specifically, the landscape represents a return to or reclamation of the natural environment of that location before European contact and includes four habitats: 1) a forest habitat that includes 25 species of trees; 2) a wetlands habitat, in which plants such as wild rice, mushrooms, and silky willows can be found; 3) a meadow habitat featuring buttercups and sunflowers; and 4) a traditional croplands habitat in which beans, squash, and corn are raised using traditional agricultural techniques. The habitats are home to more than 33,000 plants of 150 different species.¹³

Two particularly distinctive features of the landscape are the grandfather rocks and cardinal direction markers. Notable because of their special meaning, the more than forty large boulders quarried from a site in

Alma, New Brunswick, are called grandfather rocks because they are the elders of the landscape, symbolizing the cultural memory of the long relationship Indigenous peoples have with the natural environment. The boulders received special blessings prior to their journey, and again, upon their arrival. The cardinal direction markers are four stones that have been placed on the grounds along the north-south and east-west axes, linking the four directions and representing the Native peoples of the Americas. In fact, the stones traveled from corresponding communities. Specifically, the western marker stone is from Hawaii; the northern from Northwest Territories, Canada; the eastern from Great Falls, Maryland; and the southern from Punto Arenas, Chile. The cardinal direction markers also directly link the outside and inside of the museum, as the axes intersect inside the building and are visibly marked in the Potomac, the large, circular open space that represents the museum's heart.¹⁴

Perfectly at home in this natural landscape is the building itself. The 250,000-square-foot, curvilinear structure rises five stories above the wetlands, croplands, and grandfather rocks, evoking the feeling that the building is nothing more than a tremendous grandfather rock itself. Built from a textured, buff-colored limestone, the building was purposely designed to appear as if it were an ancient rock formation sculpted for thousands of years by wind and water, a design element emphasized by the water flowing over the northwest corner of the building into a pool along the north side. The color palette, stone texture, curvilinear structure, and use of water all work together to underscore the relationship between natural and built environments.¹⁵ In spite of the sense of ancientness or time depth that the building evokes, it is, at the same time, strikingly contemporary and, therefore, an even more appropriate representation of Native cultures. After all, Native Americans are vital, contemporary peoples of deep histories and ancient cultures that continue even though surrounded by modern, non-Native America.

Drawing from the vision set forth in "The Way of the People," the architectural design places high value on Native concepts of place and cosmologies. The east-facing building is aligned to the cardinal directions. Furthermore, according to design consultant, Ramona Sakiestewa (Hopi),

the paving pattern for the Welcome Plaza area outside the east entrance plots the configuration of the planets on November 28, 1989,

the date that federal legislation was introduced to create the museum. The center of the plaza is the polestar, Polaris. The Museum's south-entry plaza records lunar events, and inside the building, the Potomac celebrates the sun. The angles of solstices and equinoxes are mapped on the Potomac's floor, and a light spectrum is cast above by the sun shining through prisms set into the south-facing wall.¹⁶

The attention to detail described by Sakiestewa is present throughout the interior of the building, which makes a visit to the NMAI a distinctly tactile, sensory experience. Textures, shapes, and colors are all borrowed from nature. The color palette, for example, is drawn from plants and animals like corn, squash, and salmon, items of particular importance to many Native cultures. Furthermore, visitors may not immediately be aware that Native artistry is not relegated to the enclosed glass cases along various walls but is instead everywhere around them—from the woven copper along the stone benches in the Potomac to the shell inlay in the museum stores to the red pipestone disk in the center of the floor of the Potomac directly beneath the oculus five stories above through which natural light streams in.

The overarching tone of the museum is hospitality—a core value of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas—which also contributes to the sensory experience. In fact, one of the first features guests see upon entering the museum is the Welcome Wall, a huge screen, upon which is projected the word or phrase “welcome” in hundreds of Native languages. The NMAI is an evocative space; it is deeply concerned with how visitors feel as they experience museum, a concern attended to by guest service representatives, many of whom are Native, who assist both individual visitors and tour groups as they move through the museum.¹⁷

The tactile, sensory experience and overarching tone of hospitality continue even into the museum's cafeteria, the Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe, which offers Native foods from five regions: South America, Meso America, Great Plains, Northern Woodlands, and Northwest Coast. The food, which is traditionally prepared and frequently uses organic ingredients, includes such items as chicken tamales from South America, yellow corn tacos from Meso America, buffalo burgers from the Great Plains, maple roasted turkey from the Northern Woodlands, and juniper salmon from the Northwest Coast. While most other museums see the

cafeteria as a separate space from the museum, as evidenced by their decor (or lack thereof) and selection of fast foods, the Mitsitam cafe demonstrates the way in which food is integral to the cultures of Native peoples, not only in ceremonial gatherings and feasts but in every day life. Indeed, in most Native homes serving your visitors food continues to be, if not an actual mandate, a basic way of showing hospitality and good manners. Consequently, the Mitsitam, which is Piscataway and Delaware for “let’s eat,” is not separate from but part of the space and total experience.¹⁸

The cafe also demonstrates the ways in which the NMAI reconceptualizes what a museum is and can do. Because the NMAI celebrates living cultures, it makes space for living cultures—a space to gather and eat, a special place in the Potomac for dancing, performing, and demonstrations, as well as designated spaces for conferences and special programming. For example, in addition to the Lelawi preparatory theater, the NMAI houses a main theater for musicians, theater companies, film festivals, and story-tellers, as well as a resource center, open seven days a week, which offers a library, an interactive learning center with eighteen public-access computers, and a technologically equipped classroom. The addition of these spaces makes the NMAI more than a place to view objects—these spaces make the NMAI a place for Native peoples to celebrate, share, learn, and be.

Two spaces, however, stand out as worthy of some discussion: the Chesapeake Museum Store, which is located on the ground level, and the Roanoke Museum Store, which takes up most, if not all, of the second floor. Do these stores detract from the NMAI’s reconceptualization of what a museum is and can do? Do they not attempt to capitalize on the objectification of Native peoples and cultures—the same objectification that the entire museum has been so carefully structured to avoid? Neither store is filled with plastic tomahawks, garishly colored children’s war bonnets, or the other offensive but standard fare in the Native tourism industry. Much the opposite, both stores are filled with—in addition to books, tee-shirts, and so on—very high-priced pieces that represent the finest in Native art and craftsmanship but that also to contribute to the idea of art-as-commodity.¹⁹ Clearly, much time and energy was devoted to weaving the color palette, pieces of Native artistry, and other design features found throughout the museum into these stores, thus integrating them into the overall space and experience. However, must “Native

places” always be sites of capitalism and tourism? Does the idea of a museum as a gathering place have to include the idea of a museum as high-end shopping mall?

In the way that museums have historically represented institutional colonization, museum stores and other similar sites of cultural tourism have historically represented economic exploitation. And while a museum can be reconceptualized to serve different purposes, it is still a place of business that must make money, as we cannot always count on our government to support and protect art and culture. And, it is also true that in the same way that Native peoples hate and love museums because “they have our stuff,” Native peoples hate and love tourists and collectors because they *buy* our stuff. That cultural tourism is a cornerstone of many Native economies is a fact. That Native Americans are participants in the larger American popular and consumer culture is also a fact. Do the museum stores work against the NMAI’s reconceptualization of what a museum is and can be? Yes. Do the stores make the museum less of a Native place? Not necessarily. If Native Americans, as contemporary peoples, can integrate museums and all they stand for into the fabric of their cultural experiences, then Native peoples can accept that tourism has been and will continue to be a part of those cultural experiences as well. After all, Native places are *Native*, not ideal.

According to West, the attention to detail in creating the overall environment, in addition to the many sacred artifacts housed there, gives the museum building a certain semi-sacred or ceremonial connotation to Native visitors, a connotation from which nothing could detract.²⁰ In spite of the museum stores, the natural eco-system, the attention to place and cosmology, the relationship between natural and built environments, the ancient yet modern building and the thousands of details inside, and the living functions the spaces serve are all elements that work together to make the NMAI a truly Native place, thus impelling West, at the opening ceremony to say, “to those of you who descend from the Native ancestors who were here, ‘Welcome home.’”²¹

READING THROUGH NATIVE EYES

The same attention to detail that makes the NMAI grounds and building a Native place also make the museum building a sort of exhibition in and of itself—one all visitors, both Native and non-Native, may respond to

and interpret much more easily than the three permanent exhibitions, *Our Universes*, *Our Peoples*, and *Our Lives*. In addition to the three main exhibitions, the NMAI's current installations include: 1) *Who We Are*, a multi-media, 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 of Native Americans on business in Washington DC; 3) a major retrospective, *Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser*, a truly lovely installation that will be on display until the fall of 2005 in the Changing Exhibitions gallery; and 4) *Window on Collections*, glass-fronted cases featuring over three thousand items from the NMAI collection, arranged by the following thematic groups: arrowheads, dolls, beads, peace medals, objects featuring animals, and containers.

Our Universes, *Our Peoples*, and *Our Lives* may initially be difficult for visitors to interpret because they cannot be viewed or "read" in the usual way, chiefly because they are based on the new museological paradigm, dialogic in nature, that demands that visitors interact with the exhibits to such an extent that they actually co-create the overarching narrative rather than merely receiving it—a concept Elizabeth Archuleta (Yaqui) discusses at great length in her excellent article in this issue.

That this paradigm would become the cornerstone of the exhibitions became clear early in the planning process. Of the multitude of ideas introduced during the consultative process, one in particular stood out as critical—that the museum should be shaped by a new discipline. This discipline would draw on established systems of knowledge like history and anthropology but would incorporate them into Native ways of knowing based on Native resources, including oral traditions, elders, and spiritual leaders.²² Ultimately, this precept became the driving force behind exhibition development, leading to 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*. As a result, the innovative concept of community curated installations and the non-Indigenous system of classification were used in every facet of the museum.

Each of the three main 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 exterior and interior 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 each of these installations, a specific Native nation narrates the ways in which their 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 distinctive and diverse cultures—each acting with its own sense of agency but starting from a common place in values or experience.

The choice to develop community curated exhibits came with practical consequences. First, the sheer number of Native nations in North and South America precluded the inclusion of every community in the Americas. Instead, twenty-four communities representative of region and experience, eight per exhibition, were invited to participate with the understanding that exhibits would rotate approximately every two years to include as many communities as possible over time. So that each community curated installation would share a consistent philosophy, in spite of tribal diversity, every installation was based on the following five principles: 1) community: our tribes are sovereign nations; 2) locality: this is Indian land; 3) vitality: we are here now; 4) viewpoint: we know the world differently; and 5) voice: these are our stories.²³

After each community had been invited and accepted, NMAI staff traveled to that community to discuss the project. Then, the members of the community selected as curators traveled to Washington DC to visit their community’s objects and imagine how to use their own objects and materials to explain their experiences and understanding of a specific theme. Notably, although NMAI and community curators were working with a specific theme, the spine and community curated installations were developed in collaboration so that the text of the spine encapsulated what the communities were saying about themselves rather than the communities taking their cues from NMAI curators.²⁴ This elaborate protocol is, in the historical context of museology, revolutionary; sadly, in the context of Native agency and self-determination, this protocol should be and should have always been the basic standard, not a revolutionary approach.

Our Universes concentrates on Native belief, 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. 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, which continue to inform Native cultures today, and the balanced relationship of humans and the natural world. For example, the wall text upon entering, written by NMAI curator Emil Her Many Horses (Ogala Sioux) reads:

In this gallery you will discover how Native people understand their place in the universe and order their daily lives. Our philosophies of life come from our ancestors. They taught us to live in harmony with the animals, plants, spirit world, and the people around us. In *Our Universes*, you will encounter Native people from the Western hemisphere who continue to express this wisdom in ceremonies, celebrations, language, arts, religion, and daily life. It is our duty to pass these teachings on to succeeding generations for that is the way to keep our traditions alive.

Although Our Universes does offer guideposts for understanding the exhibition, largely by way of wall text, it is very much up to visitors to interpret what they see. The way visitors experience museum exhibitions has changed dramatically in recent years. Typically, visitors experience a museum passively, moving through content in a linear fashion and receiving a discrete lesson from a third person narrator. More recently, exhibitions have become more consultative, including more voices—a move that allows visitors to interact in certain ways but that still presents visitors with a singular narrative or lesson. In contrast, the NMAI exhibits signal a theme but offer visitors a decidedly different interpretive frame-

work—one in which they *must* actively work to gain understanding. The community installations lay out symbols, objects, photographs, and various points to consider, but they do not offer discrete, single lessons. Visitors must go through the installations, observe, ask questions, and ponder possible meanings and then consider how the pieces fit together as a whole. In other words, Our Universes, like the other permanent exhibitions, functions more like poetry than prose by asking readers to consider the tone, the language, and the rhythm and to find their own meanings within the piece as a whole.

The NMAI should not back down from this framework in spite of the confusion that has resulted and will continue to result. Instead, the NMAI should find ways to prepare visitors, to let them know how they will be asked to respond, and to “teach them to read.” I am in no way suggesting that the NMAI is required to cater to guests who may be ignorant or even hostile to the Native worldview and interpretive framework presented. After all, haven’t Native Americans been forced time and time again to make sense, with no help whatsoever, of confusing and foreign worldviews and schematics? The NMAI should prepare its visitors, Native and non-Native alike, for the experience simply because to miss out on what the NMAI offers would be a shame. Exhibitions like Our Universes are well worth extra trouble on the part of both curators and visitors.

Our Peoples 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, taking the destruction of a hurricane as its primary metaphor but ultimately focusing on survivance. The spine of the exhibit consists of glass cases containing dozens of guns, Bibles in Native languages, and treaties, along with text that describes these three as instruments of dispossession but also as instruments of resistance, resilience, and survival.

The exhibition explicitly asks visitors to consider history—what it is, who writes it, and how the writing of it affects our lives. In a very powerful installation made up of a video screen set amid a series of paintings

by George Caitlin and with narration written by NMAI curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche) and spoken by a Canadian actor, visitors are offered the following way to think about history:

This is about history and about the past, two different things. The exhibit that surrounds you now examines the alchemy that changes the past into stories, histories we tell about it. The past never changes, but the way we understand, learn about, and know about it changes all the time. . . . And over time, the way others see us has changed as well. We're viewed as saviors of the environment, barbarians, and noble savages, the lowest form of humanity, sometimes all at once. Rarely are we seen as human beings.

The words included in this installation ask visitors to discard notions of history as Truth and imagine it instead as a point of view about the past. The narration goes much further, however, to explain how museums have functioned in the past and how the NMAI is different, saying:

Museums in their collections, exhibits, and displays have been significant in defining who we are. . . . Repetition over decades has solidified them and while disparate most of these sources share this: They were not created by Native Americans. . . . We are left then with this paradox: for all our visibility we have been rendered invisible and silent, a history-loving people stripped of their own history. This museum rests on the foundation of consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Natives. It has shared the power museums usually keep. The place you stand in is the end product of that sharing, a process of giving voice.

This installation, like no other in the museum, prepares visitors to experience the new museological paradigm, first, by explaining how the NMAI is different from other museums because it "shared the power museums usually keep," and second, by asking visitors to question what history is at all. Consider the following statement:

This gallery is making history, and like all other makers of history it has a point of view, an agenda. What is found here is our way of looking at the Native American experience. What is said and what you see may fly in the face of much of what you've learned. We offer self-told histories of selected Native communities. Other com-

munities, other perspectives would have achieved different results. We present evidence to support our belief that our survival as the original people of this hemisphere is one of the most extraordinary stories in human history. Here we have done as others have done—turned events into history.

This narration questions history as Truth but does not discount the truth, that is, that facts exist, events did and do occur, and real evidence exists to support the beliefs of the Native point of view. Finally, the narration gives visitors the following guidelines for interpreting the exhibition: “So view what’s offered with respect, but also skepticism. Explore this gallery, encounter it, reflect on it, argue with it.”

Our Peoples contains very significant elements. Our Peoples refutes long-standing stories of victimization and holocaust, not by ignoring genocide but by shifting the focus to Native survivance, turning the events that have occurred in the last five hundred years from a story of tragedy into an amazing story of triumph and continuance. By focusing on the primary instruments of dispossession, the exhibition demonstrates the ways in which Native peoples used those very same instruments for their own survival, underlining agency and sovereignty. In addition, Our Peoples directly critiques the role of museums as makers of history, thus purposely opening itself up for criticism. Furthermore, the exhibition challenges long-standing societal beliefs about the nature of knowledge, truth, and evidence. In fact, Our Peoples seems to insist that leaving with questions—about survivance, about museums, and about history and truth—is better than leaving with answers.

The NMAI would do well to include many more features similar to the video installation discussed earlier and include them in easy-to-find places. Such features would help people “learn to read” the new framework and encourage visitors, Native and non-Native, to think about Native ways of knowing and Native issues in more rigorous ways. Few museums emphasize the importance of questions over answers; an intellectual proposition such as that is worth overtly integrating throughout the exhibitions.

Our Lives 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 Igloodik (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 that affect their identities, as individuals and communities, when challenged by often very harsh realities.

The spine of the exhibition directly asks visitors, “Who is Indian?” and “What does it mean to be Indian?” all the while using images and text that turn many of the standard societal answers, many of which are centuries old, right on their heads. As visitors enter, they are confronted with a wall that contains nothing but dozens and dozens of photographs of Native individuals, of all ages, with every imaginable phenotype. A large image of Fritz Scholder’s (Luiseno) *The American Indian*, depicting a dignified Native man wearing the American flag as he would a blanket is surrounded by text about nationhood, sovereignty, and citizenship. A mock-up of the urban Indian Center in Chicago demands that both Native and non-Native visitors rethink the nature of tribal communities. A glassed-in case of artifacts from the Red Power movement, including a copy of *Custer Died for Your Sins* and even *Billy Jack* emphasizes Native peoples as thoroughly contemporary, self-determining peoples and vibrant, participating-in-popular-culture individuals. Everywhere you turn pieces of cultural production—contemporary art, literature, everyday objects, Mohawk passports, beaded sneakers—insist that Indians are here and now. In the words of the poet Simon Ortiz (Acoma), “Indians are everywhere,” and, significantly, they “are not the shadows of their ancestors, but their equals.”²⁵ Each installation is designed to re-frame conceptualizations of identity, boldly reminding all visitors that “identity is not a thing, but a lived experience,” and that everything made by Native people, whether art, literature, film, or everyday objects, keeps that identity living.²⁶ NMAI curators Rickard and Tayac explain the integral link between cultural production and cultural continuance, saying, “The things we make also make us.”

Taken together, each of the exhibitions, the restaurant, the theaters, the resource center, the gathering spaces, the building, the landscape, and the thousands of details add up to make something much greater than the sum of its parts—a museum that is more than a museum, a museum that is not a museum at all but a living place bearing witness. No matter what difficulty any visitor, Native or non-Native, might have in-

interpreting the exhibits, the National Museum of the American Indian sends one message loud and clear: *We Are Still Here*.

RECEIVING GIFTS

Although museum critics heard and seemed to understand this message, the early reviews from the national press ranged from decidedly mixed to altogether unfavorable, largely conveying a sense of confusion, disappointment, and unmet expectations. Most critics seemed to expect a sort of revisionist history—the colonization of America from “The Native American” point of view. Viewing colonization and contact as one moment in a very deep history did not seem appropriate to critics for whom American history began in 1492. Viewing Native Americans as dynamic, contemporary, diverse cultures from two continents rather than as monolithic, monocultural images on tin-type or celluloid did not fit the bill for too many critics either. Still others were concerned with the intellectual rigor of the museum—how can Native communities responsibly be allowed to tell their own stories? In spite of the similar style of exhibitions in the Heye Center in New York and in spite of the signals the NMAI had been telegraphing for years about its mission and design, many critics seemed completely unprepared for the new museological paradigm at work in the NMAI and unwilling to see the museum for what it is rather than for what they personally wanted it to be, whether a repository for antiquities, a monument-style manifesto, or a victim-centered house of sentimentality.²⁷

Frankly, the critics walked into a Native place and forgot to show their good manners. By invoking “good manners,” I am not at all suggesting that the critics should have praised the museum just because it is about American Indians. I am saying that the early critics failed to recognize or accept the gift as it was presented to them. The NMAI, consistent with Native modes of learning and teaching, demanded that these guests—these pupils—actively engage and meet what was presented to them, but too few did. Instead, they seemed, implicitly, to demand that the NMAI present “lessons” in the manner to which they were accustomed. In that failure to engage, to recognize the gift, lies their failure of manners. They heard the message: *We Are Still Here*. However, that message came through in a tone of voice that may not have been the one some people expected. The highly prized Indigenous values of hospitality and good

manners are deeply manifested in every aspect of the NMAI and integral to the overarching tone. The NMAI is an inherently welcoming to its all of its guests.

No visitor, Native or non-Native, critic, wannabe, or interested observer, will leave hearing this message, “We are still here—to hell with everybody else.” Nor will they hear, “We are still here—beaten and down-trodden.” Instead, visitors will hear, “We are still here—isn’t that amazing and beautiful?” They will hear, “We are still here—we have something lovely to share. Welcome.” The National Museum of the American Indian is indeed a gift—a gift from Indian people to Indian people that honors our own survivance. It is also a gift to non-Natives, a reminder that we have something special to share, a reminder that we have always shared it, even when others have not recognized it or been willing to receive it. It is a reminder that, as West stated at the opening ceremony, “we 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 in reaching out it opens up the possibility for “the true cultural reconciliation that until now has eluded American history.”²⁸

The National Museum of the American Indian is a place where the symbolic and material meet. It is a symbol of cultural sovereignty and an act of sovereignty. It is a symbol of journeys we have taken and a physical manifestation of the decolonial journey museums are taking. It is merely a symbol of gift-giving, reciprocity, and cultural reconciliation—it is a gift in and of itself. Perhaps the National Museum of the American Indian is the biggest giveaway in the Western hemisphere.

NOTES

1. Jolene Rickard, guest curator, and Gabrielle Tayac, *Our Lives*, NMAI, 2004.
2. W. Richard West, interview by Amanda J. Cobb, January 14, 2005.
3. Margaret Dubin, *Native America Collected: The Culture of an Art World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 83–99; Christina Kreps, *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation, and Heritage Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 79–113; W. Richard West, ed., *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Smithsonian, 2000).
4. West, interview.
5. W. Richard West, “Remarks on the Occasion of the Grand Opening Cere-

mony,” National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC, September 21, 2005. Available at <http://newsdesk.si.edu/kits/nmai/>.

6. *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide* (Washington DC: Scala and Smithsonian, 2004), 16.

7. West, interview.

8. West, interview.

9. West, interview.

10. Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 91–105.

11. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 83–99.

12. George Horse Capture, “The Way of the People,” in *Spirit of a Native Place: Building the National Museum of the American Indian*, ed. Duane Blue Spruce, 31–45 (Washington DC: National Geographic and Smithsonian, 2004).

13. *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide*, 22–23.

14. *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide*, 22–23.

15. West, interview.

16. Ramona Sakiestewa qtd. in *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide*, 27.

17. *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide*, 32.

18. *National Museum of the American Indian: Map and Guide*, 39.

19. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 94–96.

20. West, interview.

21. West, “Remarks.”

22. Horse Capture, “The Way of the People,” 43.

23. W. Richard West, “Museums in the 21st Century: By Whose Authority?” (paper presented at the South Australian museum, Adelaide, Australia, March 2002).

24. West, interview.

25. Paul Chaat Smith, curator, *Our Peoples*, NMAI, 2004.

26. Rickard and Tayac, *Our Lives*.

27. Marc Fisher, “Indian Museum’s Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin-Deep,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>; Paul Richard, “Shards of Many Untold Stories: In Place of Unity, a Melange of Unconnected Objects,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>; Edward Rothstein, “Museum Review; Museum with an American Indian Voice,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2004, E1.

28. West, “Remarks.”