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INTERVIEW

Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian

AMANDA J. COBB

The following is the transcription of an interview I conducted with Richard West on January 14, 2005, at the Hotel Santa Fe in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

AMANDA COBB: Rick, if you would please begin by briefly describing the origin and evolution of the museum.

RICHARD WEST: Well I have been at the museum since it began. I was appointed as the director on June 1, 1990, and I am the only director the museum has had. Prior to being appointed, I had a consulting relationship with the museum, but I competed for the position of director; There was this long search process, huge search committee—search committee of I think twenty-two people—and so, that's how I came to the place.

I would have to say that in some ways the jump from being a practitioner of the law to being the director of the National Museum of the American Indian may seem like a far one, but for me, it really was not for a couple of different reasons. One is my own background. My father is a Native artist, and I grew up in that context. Museums were one of his principal venues. I grew up in Oklahoma, and both the Philbrook in Tulsa and the Gilcrease in Tulsa—as well as museums in Oklahoma City—had significant interests in Native art. So I kind of grew up in those contexts. While I was not a professional museum person, in my background, I certainly had been around them a lot. I knew a great deal about my own community, the Cheyenne community, the Southern Cheyenne community to be even more particular. And then in addition to that, I had been in Washington practicing law and primarily representing American Indian organizations and tribes, so I had a lot of experience on the Hill. . . . And then, finally, I had a previous connection—avocationally, if you will, while I was practicing law—with the Smithsonian Institution and so all of that kind of fit together in a way which made moving from the practice of law in New Mexico, which I dearly

loved, to being the director of the National Museum of the American Indian not something that was non-contextual. . . .

And you know, I'd come to the museum with some broad notion of what it was I aspired to for the institution without at all being presumptuous and knowing that one of the first things I wanted to do was to make sure the process of creating the museum was extremely broad-gauged and inclusive so that my ideas might or might not be what was bought into by everybody else. But it is fair to say that I came with a couple of notions or ideas that I felt were important, and one was that I very much wanted the institution, notwithstanding its name, to be an international institution of living cultures.

Now that statement says two things. First it says, by referring to the museum as international, that the cultural axis in this hemisphere is north to south. Euro-American culture evolved going east to west if you will. Ours is different. And the political boundaries that separate parts of this hemisphere are certainly not our cultural boundaries. You'll find the same people on both sides of the Canadian border, the same people on both sides of our border with the country of Mexico, for example. So I wanted to recognize that somehow.

The second point, though, is living cultures, which is to say that it would be an international institution that assumed from the very beginning that we were talking about an immense time span, "time depth," in this hemisphere, but a time span that ran from that time depth up through the present and in to the future. There are hundreds of Native communities in this hemisphere right now; there are thirty to forty million people who are Indigenous in this hemisphere. This museum had to be about them too, not just our ancestors or ancient cultural patrimony as important as that is. So that was one of the key values that I attached great importance to in my own mind.

Another value would be that I really felt that the Native communities in this hemisphere were quite capable of bringing to bear . . . their own views, voices, sets of eyes. That is not meant in denigration of other systems of knowledge. It has been very important in representing and interpreting Native peoples—whether it is archaeology, anthropology, history, art history—all of those are valid in my view, but what I wanted to do at the National Museum of the American Indian was add to that table of conversation, Native people themselves, because I believe, based upon my own upbringing, my, I think, respect for contemporary scholarship that Native peoples themselves have authentic and authoritative voices to bring to their own representation. So that was the second value.

The third one would be what sits behind the fourth museum. And that is to say that the National Museum of the American Indian isn't simply about three grand buildings—two in Washington DC and one in New York City. It is also about how you husband the resources of this vast institution . . . and bring them

to Indian Country, recognizing that only a tiny fraction of Native America, throughout this hemisphere, will ever set foot in Washington DC to see our grand place on the National Mall. So that was the third value, and that was kind of the core of the NMAI.

Now, you know those propositions were tested. . . . When I did become the director we ended up having some twenty-five to thirty consultations over a period of two and half to three years way back at the beginning of the museum to see . . . what came out of Indian Country; and we consulted with others too but predominantly with Native people. We asked, “What do you expect from this place—what do you expect to see, what do you want in it, what’s it supposed to do?” And what came back very consistently, frankly, is variations in form perhaps but ideas and expressions, opinions that centered very much on the three propositions I just described. You have to remember that there was . . . this historic love/hate relationship between museums and Native communities. We have, we value them in a way because they have our stuff, and we hate them because they have our stuff. It kind of bounces back and forth in that way, and what I was trying to figure out, what really came out of Indian Country in these consultations, was that you can somehow mediate those distinctly different kinds of opinion if you create a place in Washington DC and New York that uses the voice of Native people to represent and interpret themselves and at the same time allocates resources, human resources, connections, collaborations with Indian Country that end up bringing the National Museum of the American Indian to Indian Country in various forms so that it really is looked at as a currently relevant institution in terms of the deep commitment of contemporary Native communities to maintain culture.

AC: So do you think that there are ways in which the NMAI actually reconfigures what it means to be a museum—the very definition of what a museum is, particularly for American Indians? For example, this love/hate relationship based on American Indians typically being in natural history museums?

rw: I very much think that it reconfigures how museums look at or connect with Indian tribes. . . . And the way we’ve configured scholarship and these kinds of relationships that we’ve established. One has to remember again that museums, as a concept, are utterly foreign to Native people. That’s not the way we do things. We have never in that way objectified our culture as a piece of anthropology or even as a piece of art, even though we have great respect for aesthetics. . . . All of the things that we create that have always been part of a daily mix of life—they are not hung on walls to be seen by crowds of people, so there’s that fundamental difference and in that way, museums will always be artificial spaces in some way. But what you *can* do to make them as realistic and real as possible is to try to connect them in very direct ways with the Native communities who actually created the material so that it almost becomes a Native place in Wash-

ington DC or New York even though it sits in a museum. That was kind of the aspiration.

ac: I think that that philosophy really affects the way one sees everything in the museum—you really come to think of the objects in the museum not as objects but as living things, so that everything in the museum is alive and it becomes a living space.

rw: I really think that's right. I'll make a couple of points relating to that comment. One is that the National Museum of the American Indian will never be—at least during my tenure, and I hope it never will be even when my tenure is over—simply a palace of objects. There's a very interesting story that a good friend of mine told me that is illustrative of this. He said, this gentleman . . . is a great fan of the museum, and he's been over several times to see it. They bring their friends over, their relatives who come in from out of town, and he was over with a group and one of the members of that group, a very distinguished woman who is a former trustee of a very, very prominent American art museum. And she listened to him extolling the NMAI standing there in the Potomac for a while, and then she finally kind of pulled him by the elbow over to a corner and she said, "I don't like this museum. This museum is *not* made for collectors. There's something else going on in here." And that, in a way, says it precisely. . . .

The opening of the National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall, in terms of its vision, was actually more than the opening of a museum, even more than the opening of the Smithsonian Museum, glorious as that is. It really represented a very important step in the entire hemisphere's coming to grips with its own cultural consciousness; and therefore, it was almost a metaphor or a symbol for that much broader proposition, but it stands anchored in that proposition. That's what's so telling about the National Museum of the American Indian, and I think that that makes it a rather different place from being only a museum. It's not just a cultural destination; it is really civic space, if you will, public space that transcends its being a museum to become a meeting ground where this connection between the cultural origins of this hemisphere and everything that came after it finally come together in a way where some kind of real understanding can occur that sets the stage for cultural reconciliation over a long haul. . . .

ac: I don't know that I could articulate it quite so beautifully as you did right then, but I do feel like on the opening day that you could feel a sense of that in air. We all knew it was it more important than just an opening. It was obvious—you could just feel it.

rw: And it was that way for everybody. . . . A good friend of mine, a non-Indian, who was sitting in the audience but fairly far up near the stage, said, "You know, this thing happened as I was sitting there." And I said, "Well what's that?" And he said, "There were dragonflies everywhere." You see, dragonflies for

Cheyennes are kind of ancestor spirits, if you will. It reminded me of another woman who . . . said, “Not only are we here, but the ancestors are here.” And she meant that almost quite literally—that 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 that procession, that there was something very fundamental going on that day.

ac: It was a beautiful day.

rw: Yes, it was.

ac: From visiting the museum, it was very clear to me that the curators, trustees, etcetera, had made a very conscious choice to focus on survivance and continuance over genocide and colonization, although those things are also certainly part of the story and present in the museum. What do you believe is the significance of this choice? What impact do you believe this will have for Native people?

rw: Well, it was a choice. The thing that I would emphasize in the beginning, though, is that it was not necessarily an either/or choice. It's not that you are, on the one hand about genocide and destruction *or*, on the other, about survivance. The story of survivance is a long story that passes through much time and much history and much experience. And so one does see it there, but it is not just about that.

I'll make two points. The first is it is not just about the cultural destruction, and the reason it isn't is because, as horrible as that story was for Native peoples, when one thinks of it, we've been here the better part of twenty thousand years. Even if you collapse this period of destruction into about five hundred years, you're still talking about 5 percent of the time we've been here. I wanted to focus, if we could, on the grandness and the strength of this entire story. . . . One can't walk through Our Peoples, I think, one of the three major opening exhibitions, and not feel the image of the destruction.

ac: I think the metaphor of the hurricane is really very effective in that exhibit.

rw: Oh, it is. I really believe it is. And then the wall that kind of goes from pre-Columbian objects through the creation of gold, the melting of gold objects created by mostly Latin American Native communities, and into ingots that got sent back to Spain to the swords, to the guns, to the Bibles—all of that is story of cultural contact and frequent cultural destruction. So it's not that it's not there, or not acknowledged, but in the end, the story about those cruel edges of history in this hemisphere is also a story about the ultimate triumph of Native peoples over all of those challenges.

ac: And I think that is really coming across. On a recent trip to the museum, I got into a conversation with a visitor, a non-Native visitor, who asked me if I knew what “survivance” meant—he asked me what the difference was between survival and survivance. He was really turning it over in his head, and he said,

after this discussion, “So it’s like my favorite line from David Copperfield, you have to decide if you’re the victim or the hero in your own story. And I thought that was a pretty good understanding of what Our Peoples is demonstrating—a story of triumph.

rw: I really believe that that is right. And, of course, Our Lives is very much about that too and this kind of narrative context—how we continue to make our way culturally. And there is literally a line, and I thought about it a long time, in my seven-minute speech the day that we opened that says, “We have known the cruel edge of colonialization, but we realize most and adhere to constantly, is that we are not its victims.” So, that is the story that really weaves itself together in the NMAI.

ac: Do you think that the primary purpose of the museum is as a place to educate non-Natives about that story, or is it more of a place for Natives to see ourselves, to find ourselves? I know that it has to be both to some extent.

rw: Right. Again it is a proposition that I would not state in the disjunctive, which is to say that it’s not one or the other. It is both of those things. We have always maintained that the NMAI had to be a place—even its public forums, if you will, the museum in New York, the museum in Washington DC—that was an appropriate, ringing affirmation of the significance and substance of the cultural contributions of Native peoples to the lives of all of us, but to the lives of Native peoples themselves too. So it is a place of affirmation, and I think that Native people felt that when they were there on that day—they still feel that when they come. So that’s a legitimate part of this process.

However, 99 percent of its four million visitors a year in Washington and its several hundred visitors in New York are non-Native. So we have to also figure out ways of bridging those connections and getting rid of the gaps and figuring out what it is we want them to leave the museum with in their minds. And that’s where the concepts that you and I just talked about are so terribly important.

So it is really profoundly about both of those things. We really did not want the National Museum of the American Indian to be simply about Native people; we did want it to be *of* Native people, but in being of Native people, we also wanted to be a vehicle that communicated this voice to the millions of non-Native visitors who will come through the doors every year.

ac: Were there specific challenges in telling that story or those stories in terms of representing both North and South American Natives?

rw: Well, I think it is fair to say that simply because most of the Native employees—and they represent 20 to 25 percent of the staff in the museum—are from North America, there was always kind of a built-in inclination in that regard, but we worked very hard to make sure that we were representative of Central and South America as much as North America; for example you can simply do a count of the communities that participated in the direct curation of the

twenty-four individual exhibitions, what you'll find is that four of them are from Canada, eight of them are from Central and South America—and that actually includes one that is from a Caribbean community—and twelve are from the United States. So you can see in that that there is an effort really to spread the story around the hemisphere, and that representation occurs, or that diversity of representation occurs, in all three of the permanent exhibitions. You can't go into any of those three permanent exhibitions and not get a sampling of Canada, the United States, and Latin America.

AC: I'd actually like to turn our conversation right now to the exhibitions and begin, actually, with the building itself, which I think in many ways could stand as a sort of exhibit. Could you please discuss the concept of the building itself, its placement on the Mall, its physical structure, its design?

rw: Sure, and it ties to another point I'd like to make. . . . The National Museum of the American Indian is about so much more than exhibitions. . . . I realize and I understand—and we of course were treated in that way—that somehow the measure of the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian from the standpoint of the critical community focused almost entirely on the exhibitions themselves. But just to go to your point, which I'll get to more directly in a moment, there is this building—what does it all mean? And besides exhibitions, there's public programming, there's a cultural resources center out in Suitland. How do all of those fit into this story? . . . Everybody's inclination is to think of museums as being exhibitions—that's what they really do. Well, it is what they do, but it is not *all* that they do, and if we're trying to create the kind of institution that you and I have already discussed, it cannot lie simply in creating exhibitions. There are other vital components to what happens.

But let's go back to the building for just a moment, because what happened is that the building was tied directly to the consultation process that I referred to a moment ago. Because in this consultation process, we were doing two things. We were actually developing the architectural program, not the designs, but the architectural program, which is to say, what kinds of spaces do you want—not exactly what they look like, but what are the functions of them. And we were also getting programmatic information. The two kind of came together, if you will, in that process of consultation. But the building was very much again like the programming effort to say, "What is this? What should this look like? What kinds of things do you expect to see?"

And one of the things that came back . . . was that it is not just a physical building, it's a place, and we attach great importance to place. It has ceremonial, it has quasi-sacred kind of connotations to it. So that was a big proposition that was throughout the consultations. And then that spins off, as you might expect, into subtexts that are really rather specific—natural light, water, the presence of water, curvilinearity, organic forms, because most of our design aesthetics—not

always—but most our design aesthetics frequently come from nature. You don't see many lines in nature; it's all curves for the most part. So those are things that had much to do with how that place was created, and even the selection of the color of the stone—we didn't want cold, gray marble; we wanted something that connoted earth, that had warmth to it, and that's where the buff color of the stone came from.

ac: It really does almost give the sense of having been carved out of something that was already there versus something that was an imposed, built structure.

rw: Absolutely. That was said specifically and explicitly during the consultation. If you can make it look as though this was a block of stone already sitting there, not set there by us, but already sitting there in nature, that then was over time sculpted by wind and water. So all of these things got wrapped up in this building. And then, it's not just the building of course; it's the surround, the eco-environment which is equally important and which we devoted much money in terms of design time and much money, in terms of the expense of the building, to doing. And that is again because of this notion of connectedness in Native minds, virtually throughout the hemisphere, between built environment and non-built environment. The two are always with respect to the other, if you will. Therefore, if you go into the building you should know from having been into the Potomac, standing there in the Potomac, you look directly out into the Mall, and there's this great sense of connectedness when you're in the building with what's outside. And then, when you're outside the building on that procession coming along the north façade, and you're walking by what is the Potomac, you look in and see what's going on. And so it was an attempt to keep the visual transparency extremely high. But that is an evocation of a sense of aesthetics that comes out of the Native community about what you do with built structures and what you don't do with them. And so what happened—I think as a result—is what we have created, and it may sound like its reaching a bit, but I really don't think it is: we've created a Native place.

ac: I don't think that's reaching, and I also think the museum can serve such a nice function. For how many years now have Native people, Native leaders, had to go to Washington DC, on their own, or with their lawyers, but always having to go to DC? And the significance is not lost as you sit in the building, particularly in the resource center. I spent some time there because it was a nice place to stop and sit and think and take some notes, and I was looking directly at the U.S. Capitol.

rw: It has the best view in the house.

ac: You can't help thinking, here I am in this Native place, looking out at the United States Capitol. And it provides a really nice function as a gathering place for when people need to come to town, a place to be. The restaurant can serve as a gathering place too—a Native gathering place.

rw: And one of the places you can't really see right now that relates to the point that you're making is the gallery where Ben Campbell's jewelry is on display: That actually is a conference space, not a permanent gallery.

ac: Oh, I didn't realize that.

rw: No that's not really gallery space, that is a conference area where Native people who are in town for meetings who are looking for a space can simply come and sit down and meet together. So it has, quite literally, that kind of function. And you know, the unique place, the cafeteria has been a crashing success. It is leading the Smithsonian financially right now—what they are earning through their cafeterias. I have to tell you that it was originally suggested that we might consider going the route that has been traversed by some of our fellow museums—bring in a fast food chain or something—and we resisted that.

ac: I'm very glad you did.

rw: Yes, and so are we. And now, even so is the Smithsonian, believe it or not. You know, we gather around food; we always have. I can remember going into, when I was a little kid, going into western Oklahoma, walking into some of the shotgun houses, literally two rooms, people living in very challenged circumstances, you'd get a breakfast that just rolled on for hours practically. So there's this connection of food and social grace and communication, and so we really wanted the cafeteria to do that. And it is just a resounding success, not only in that it is programmatic, that we're talking about Native foods, at least implicitly in there, but just as a warm gathering space that sits right by the water, which unfortunately wasn't there when you were there recently, because we've sprung a leak. But you know, it's beautiful to sit down there. I go down there myself—I eat lunch just kind looking out at the water pouring toward the windows.

ac: No, you can easily see it as a place. . . . I can imagine saying to someone, "Next time I'm in town let's meet at the museum." As opposed to being something outside of your normal social space, it would be something that becomes *part* of your social space.

rw: I absolutely agree.

ac: Thinking about exhibits more specifically, in what ways did the museum involve individual American Indians as artists, as curators? In what ways did the museum involve tribal nations? And to what extent were Native people involved as leaders in the curatorial process?

rw: Well, very significantly from the very beginning. The whole methodology really springs from the notion that, with respect to these exhibitions, our own curators' primary roles were ones of facilitation. . . . This is a mechanism that has not been tested that thoroughly in museums, and we're still ironing out some of the kinks, which I think should be expected. It's a very complicated process, very labor and time intensive if you really want to do your level best to allow Native people to speak for themselves through your exhibitions. And this concept of

Native voice and defining exactly what that is and what that means and how you implement it I know is complicated—and we know it’s complicated—but it was the fundamental piece of the methodology that we used; and there were both individuals and communities involved.

What we did when we were inviting the twenty-four Native communities that sit there now to collaborate with us was very specific; there was a rather specific protocol to all of that. . . . It began with a letter that went from me to them asking if they had an interest in this collaboration. We had no declinations. Nobody said, “No, we don’t want to.” All of them wanted to. We actually even had more to begin—we had upwards of twenty-eight to thirty—and had to cut back because of time and space actually. But then, what would happen after they accepted is that we would go to their community, not drag them to Washington DC but to go talk more about it with them, in their place, in their community.

Then, the third step was to invite them, and that third step resulted in our putting in work rooms all of their objects from our collections that we held—which in some cases is vast—it would be thousands of objects, and talking with them about it. And there we talked about the overriding themes of the exhibitions, the large themes that encompass Our Universes, Our Peoples, and Our Lives, which actually came out of the earlier consultation processes—so there is a Native connection from the beginning of it all. But to talk about these themes, what they wanted to say, were they comfortable talking about these themes in the context of their own material? Always they were. And then they selected the objects; they said what they wished to say about those objects. Then we proceeded from there to create the text we needed for the exhibitions. And then they even had a chance to respond to the design of the space. They had something to say about the design of the space to begin with, and then they were basically consulted about the final sign-off about the design of the space itself, completely apart from the objects.

So that is the community curation, I think, from beginning to end. It is a complex methodology, and we’re still sorting out how to make that methodology work best. In the case of these opening exhibitions, it was a collaboration, if you will, between those community curated areas and then the spines of the exhibition. The wall, for example, in Our Peoples was curated by our own curators. But it was an effort to try to pull together major themes that came out of the individual exhibitions. So even there, we were following . . . the lead of what had been signaled by the Native communities themselves. The spines were created; we talked through with [the communities] what things are being said, and then we tried to encapsulize those [statements for visitors] so that they can understand, if they go through in twenty minutes rather than two or three hours, what it is that is actually being said in the exhibition. It’s complicated from an exhibition standpoint.

AC: Very.

rw: *Very* complicated. And then when you add to that what is being said museologically, because that notion of curation not only sets the museological paradigm on its ear, on its head—on its ear too maybe—but on its head. Once you've done that, which upset some people, you know, some critics, you're going toward different systems of classification. Sometimes you don't identify things; sometimes things mean something different from what people are normally used to seeing.

And it can be disconcerting to visitors, and we've recently had, we've begun evaluating these exhibitions from the very beginning in terms of audience response and that kind of thing, and I want to do that. As the director, I want them evaluated thoroughly from the get-go through Native eyes, through non-Native eyes, etcetera. And one of the things we have come to, that I personally am very committed to, I don't want us to address whatever dislocation in understanding and communication may have occurred by simply making our exhibits look more like everybody else's in terms of what they say. A different tack is to say we need to explain better what it is we're doing in some form—it can be audio, it can be something else that's on the screen—and then prepare people better for what they're seeing.

For example, let me just give you one example, there is an absolutely beautiful segment done by Paul Chaat Smith, not the narrator, the person who wrote it, but that narration that is to your left about making history—it is to your left as you go into *Our Peoples*—and it has all the Caitlin paintings . . .

AC: Oh, yes, I think it's one of the most important pieces in the *Our Peoples* exhibit. It's about a three-minute-long video on how to think about history. It actually invites you to . . .

rw: Differ. Talk about it. And what we're finding. What we're finding is, thankfully, more people are going into that than we thought were originally, because it's a little bit off to the side. And so if you listen to that before you see *Our Peoples*, it's hard to misunderstand what it is that's actually being said in that gallery. And so, some of it is mechanical, some of it is how you articulate the space and articulate yourselves in the space without departing from your museological vision in ways that help the audience understand things that they're seeing in very different ways rather than kind of giving up the ship, if you will, and saying that, well, the way we address this problem is, "Oh yeah we'll do it the same way everybody else does." And so that's a challenge, but it is one that I'm quite consistently persistent about as the director.

AC: I'm very glad to hear that because I think that one of the most interesting things about the museum, one of the most potentially significant things about the museum in terms of, as you said, setting the paradigm on its ear, is redefining what a museum should be, how to read that space. The museum demands,

as a sort of living space, that visitors to it have a relationship with it rather than simply walking through and being told something or hearing something.

rw: Yes, absolutely.

ac: The exhibits say, “No, talk with me about this, think about this,” so that it requires interpretation. The museum itself can really only be read from a social perspective—it requires a give and take. And . . . that particular video you’re talking about, I actually stopped and video-taped it myself, because I thought it was one of the best things in the exhibit.

rw: Paul Chaat Smith actually wrote the script for it.

ac: He did a great job with it.

rw: Oh, he really did. Yeah, I know that’s just really, really important to me, that we do it that way, and remain consistent intellectually about that. . . . A good friend of mine who was an associate director of the museum who, having completed and gotten us open on the Mall, is now going on to something else. He has, he’s been in exhibitions all of his career, unlike me who was a lawyer much of mine. And he talks about the stages that exhibitions have gone through, and his view is that they’ve gone from completely passive experiences, if you will, to a mildly consultative positioning where . . . the voices you hear are more inclusive, but it still comes out in kind of a singular message, to a format that truly is conversational. [A format] that’s dialogic and doesn’t answer all the questions, that sometimes ends up posing questions.

ac: In fact, I think if people leave with more questions than they had when they started, I would say that is probably a good thing.

rw: I think it is a good thing. But again, it is not the experience that some museum-goers are accustomed to.

ac: No.

rw: And so they want to be told. In fact, when I take people myself to the Lelawi theater to see the preparation film, which I love. By the way, wait till you see what’s coming up for our signature film, which is why . . . I’m actually on my way to Sundance because it has been accepted and will be shown at the Sundance film festival and then will be a part of our programming. It’s about forty minutes long in the auditorium and will be shown this coming spring. But I kind of warn people, “Don’t expect didactics, don’t expect an imposed narrative. Think of an impressionist piece of art, a cubist piece of art that simply, from a number of perspectives, lays thoughts, visions, ideas on a table for you to take with you out of here to think about as you’re going through the rest of the museum.” And when you think of it, that’s what it is. It is sovereignty, it is time-depth, its contemporaneousness, it is ceremony, etcetera. What’s interesting to me is that in our, so far, our evaluation of every different kind of experience you can have in that place, the theater is a ringing, ringing success and cuts across all kinds of lines as being communicative in a very, very effective way about all of that.

I'll never forget my boss, the deputy secretary of the Smithsonian, was very worried about the preparation theater film. Actually it was because one of her employees . . . said, "Well this doesn't say things; it doesn't give truths that you're supposed to remember as you come out of there," and so she kind of was [thinking] along those lines too, my boss, even though she's a wonderful, wonderful person, to the point that she wanted the secretary to come see it. . . . When the film stopped, the minute it went off, he said, "I like that, I like that." It's not really a kind of a carefully calculated narrative; you know, it doesn't tell you things in a way of saying, "This is right; this is what you should know," and all that kind of thing. It's a mosaic really, a kind of cultural mosaic of Native peoples past, present . . . anyway, he got it. Perfectly. And so, that again is the notion that sort of crops of throughout the museum.

ac: I do think—as the word gets out about what the vision of the museum is along those lines, how it hopes that people read or interpret what is inside or interact with that in a dialogic way—that people will probably rise to the occasion.

rw: I think they will, I mean museums are becoming more like that anyway. I mean museums *have* become more interactive. Bless their hearts, the children's museums kind of led the movement years ago. They said, "Forget this stuff about going in there and being quiet for an hour while you're looking at stuff."

ac: Well, I have to ask, do you have a personal favorite exhibit or place in the museum or on the grounds?

rw: I probably do have a favorite place. I'm not sure if I'd say I have a favorite exhibit. I kind of like them all, but I will say that there is a place, part of the building, not just as a physical space but because of the meaning of the physical space is my favorite, and that's the Potomac. And the reason I like it is because it kind of encapsulates, in one space in the museum, everything that I think is important about the museum, personally. And let me just tick them off, just so you know.

For one thing, there's the grandness of its architecture, it's just a beautiful space to be in. But because it is an atrium, it is of course oriented, you know, by looking at the wooden floor along the cardinal axes, you know, east, west, north, south, but also earth and sky. In other words, it connects the ground, because it's on the ground floor, with the sky, which you can see right through the oculus. So it is highly directionally oriented, which I love, because that's the way Native people see the world. It gives a dimensionality. Most people think of Indians of being on the cardinal directions—that's two-dimensional. It is the earth and sky that give it spherical dimension also, that makes it really three-dimensional. And so it connotes this ancient understanding of how we see space around us. So it has ancientness to it. It looks directly to the outside. That is one of the primary spaces where you see this wonderful connection between built environment and outside environment. You can see our own eco-environment; you can see be-

yond the eco-environment to the Mall. You can see the water element coming by the Potomac there. So there is, are, these fundamental notions of kind of what we are.

On the other hand, it's an extremely contemporary space. It is where performance art goes on in the museum. It is demonstration space. You probably saw the kayak and Hawaiian dugout boat sitting there. So it is that also. It has a wooden floor, which I insisted on because we aging dancers don't like dancing on stone; it gives us shin splints. So you know it's a performance space, so it's meant for contemporary Indians too. And it, of course, has the prisms upon the south wall, and I have these wonderful pictures. You know the prisms all line up on the solstices, and for the winter solstice—which was actually the twenty-second, if I'm not mistaken, not the twenty-first—we have these beautiful pictures; it was a sunny day, and they just completely lined up. They are marked in the floor. You can look at the floor and the dark stone—which is kind of an inside border to the red granite surround—tells you where the equinoxes will land and where the solstices will be as we go through the year, so there's even this connotation of an understanding of time, that . . . it is a cycle, it's not linear, it's not beginning to end, it repeats itself, beginnings meet ends, ends meet beginnings. So it's this single space in the museum that kinds of pulls together that which is very old and goes back to our very beginning but connects it supremely with quite contemporary expression too.

AC: It really is a lovely space. I'm backtracking just a little bit, just so you get a chance to speak to this. I really think the museum does a nice job of illustrating a common Indigenous worldview and also of providing tribal specificity and avoiding the stereotype of "the Indian Culture." I think it is successful along those lines, but how do you think, what is it about the exhibits that has made that possible? Is it the community curation that really helped achieve that?

rw: First, I should say that, as a premise, that that was something we thought about, that we talked about within the museum, and that came about repeatedly in the consultation process. That somehow we had to try to do a number of things at the same time as we were being sure that this wasn't some kind of pan-Indian mish-mash, you know kind of lumping everything together, and that it respected the fact that one of the reasons we still walk the earth as viable as we are is because we have adhered to cultural community, if you will, and that differs throughout the hemisphere. So we wanted very much to be sure that diverseness was richly represented. And what we did, even if we couldn't do all of it at once, we had to signal that from the very beginning; then it was an effort to point out that there are certain big ideas that, it perhaps safely can be said, transcend this diversity and can be spoken of more commonly among all Native peoples. Well, that's a challenge. I mean there's a lot of dangerous territory in between those two propositions.

But the way we tried to do it methodologically is the following: We had overarching themes for the exhibitions that captured, if you will, this transcendence of idea and outlook and cosmology, really, that we felt *did* unite Native people. Our Universes, for example, is about some of these transcendent propositions, where in individual communities you'll find some of the same concepts floating around even if the expression of them was not the same. And then, at the same time, it livened those transcendent ideas with very individual presentations and individual community voices with respect to all of them. And so that was what really sat at the heart of the curation process, which is to say that it was a combination of the two in ways that I think do actually work. It's hard, I think, for people who come out there not appreciating that there is tremendous diverse-ness in Native America—not only historically—but right now.

AC: I really like the wall that says, "We Are the Evidence" that lists all the nations—it's really nice.

rw: Yes, and unfortunately that was not up there at the time the museum opened.

AC: I didn't think I remembered it at the opening, but it was so crowded. . . .

rw: In fact there are several things—the hurricane, that element—there are a couple of things, major things, that were not operating, but they're now all up and running.

But I think that [tribal specificity/transcendence] is really an important idea. So it is a principal for us that that is the way we should do it, and I associated with that principle a sub-principle, if you will, that again it's not simply a question of doing it in ethnographic terms—it's not simply pointing out these bowls come from here, those pieces of pottery come from there, these baskets come from central California, these baskets come from northern California. It's not that at all, again it's an effort, I think, that combines objects with people in a community context to make the point of differentness, and if you can do it that way to point out the diversity, then you have a much more complete picture of it.

AC: Thank you, and now I'd like to get your responses and reactions to the opening events themselves before we end.

rw: Well, I guess I should say that, as the director, dearly as I loved them, I'm glad they're behind us. They were a lot to undertake. I have to say that I fantasized about the procession, I think, the third day I had the job. And I did so, it wasn't just idle thought, I hope, it was a reflection of some of the values I talked about with you way back at the beginning, which is to say, it was international; it was of contemporary people. It was actually a procession that went from the Washington Monument basically toward the Capitol but stopped at the National Museum of the American Indian, and so it had a kind of political and cultural connotation to it. I thought it was a day of immense power and majesty, and frankly, I couldn't have been happier with it. It was completely apart from the

fact that not only did twenty-five to thirty-five thousand Native people make the effort to get there, but my own troops from a logistical standpoint just managed it absolutely flawlessly.

And it was just a very powerful day that again enlarged the picture. I mean everybody who was there understood that we weren't talking only about the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian, that it really was hard evidence of American history circling back on itself in very important ways to come to new points of beginning and new points of understanding about the Native experience and how it related to the lives of *all* Americans, not just in the museum but even outside of the museum and in contemporary life. That's why I think so many people found that day so deeply moving, as did I.

ac: Well you couldn't have asked for a nicer day. It was just blue skies. I'm sure in terms of your fantasies, you probably also had various nightmares that went along with those—that it would rain or that you would get laryngitis. . . .

rw: You have no idea of the fifty-seven different contingency plans we had that day. But it was remarkable. Not to get too mystical about it, but the fact is that we had that weather because one hurricane . . . passed through the two last days before the weekend that we opened. Usually they go on northeast and head up into the north Atlantic. Instead, it turned around and went directly back south and held the next hurricane at bay for an entire week, so we had not just one day, but an entire week of just beautiful, beautiful weather.

And the other thing that happened that I found quite remarkable, in addition to the dragonflies, is that at 12:30 . . . about 11:30, we began at noon I guess. At about 11:30, two eagles circled for, I don't know, about half an hour, right over the stage area where the ceremony was being held. It's not that eagles are never seen in Washington, but they're not seen that frequently. I mean there were just these things that came together to make for a very, very special day.

ac: Could you please respond to some of the various reactions to the opening events and the museum itself? For example what is your response to the reactions of the Native attendees who were part of the procession?

rw: There was somebody who recognized me just down in the lobby last night, who actually knows my brother very well but who has never met me and didn't even get to go the opening for various reasons but who just came over and talked about it for fifteen minutes or something, about all that it meant. I just, my sense of it, anecdotally admittedly—we did not run a formal survey saying how did you like the procession—is that Native people just felt so good.

ac: I have to say the excitement was palpable. I walked in the procession, and my father, who is Chickasaw, really wanted to be there but decided not to go. I felt like I spent a good part procession on the cell phone with him saying things like, "Now we're walking past this . . . , now we're moving here," just describing everything along the way. I think there were so many people at home who were

there in spirit. It was just exciting—a level of emotion all over Indian Country that day.

rw: I really think that's right. And I've really heard that from Indian Country itself, with just a few exceptions, one of which I think was [the Navajo Nation]. I haven't actually seen [the response] myself, but they had trouble with specific exhibits.

ac: I believe they were looking for specific tribal representation.

rw: Yes, that's right, and I would say that I certainly am respectful of the viewpoint. What I will say is that very few tribes, considering the fact that we are unable simply because of space constraints to represent every single tribe in the hemisphere, although it's far more than the twenty-four in the individually curated parts. It's all told I think upwards of a couple of hundred when you try to combine everything, including I must say, a handsome, handsome presentation of Navajo chiefs' blankets that's right in the main corridor downstairs. So it's this, I would say, while I understand the objection, and I know that Navajo is one of the largest tribes and they feel a certain sort of legitimating title from that, the museum is about legitimating *all* of Native America, and we won't always be able to do it all at once, and so, we do ask for patience. And I would have to say that the vast majority of tribes—in fact, the Navajos are the only ones I can think of where I've heard something like that explicitly—are completely understanding of the fact that we can't do it all at once. And I think perhaps, the Navajo themselves or whoever was making those particular comments didn't understand the various places within the museum where Navajo culture has been presented. . . .

ac: Part of the specific reaction, I think, also has to do with the fact that every Native person who went in on the opening day, went in looking . . .

rw: For your own stuff. Of course, I understand that quite specifically, and that's the very reason that I made sure that we did not . . . somebody said, "Why don't you do something specifically on the Southern Cheyenne?" They said, "You should do that, you're the director." And I said, "That's the reason I'm *not* going to do that." I want people to understand that we're trying to make sure that this museum, this place, reflects us geographically, reflects us in terms of cultural diversity, etcetera. And we will have to make some choices, and they may not always be the choices that some person from a particular tribe, who wants to see themselves there, right now, would prefer, but it's the fairest way to go about it.

ac: How often will the tribally specific exhibits rotate?

rw: They turn over at the rate of one to two a year, beginning next year. So they will turn over reasonably rapidly. And then, of course, there are other exhibitions. For example, what's going to succeed the Morrison/Houser is a just a phenomenal Northwest Coast exhibit that reflects a number of both Canadian and American Northwest Coast communities . . . that will come into that space after Morrison and Houser. And the open storage displays obviously repre-

sented an opportunity to diversify the different kinds of objects as well as the different tribal affiliations of them that people see. We have talked about how we can expand those kinds of spaces to get even more of the collection out.

ac: Now, some individuals have suggested that which tribes were represented in the exhibits was based on politics and how much money any individual tribe donated to the museum. Would you like to speak to that?

rw: Well, I mean it's simply not the case. If you take the three biggest donors—who are the Oneida of New York, Mashantucket Pequot, and Mohegan—they're not in any of the individual presentations. They didn't ask for it, they didn't demand it, and it was never a question for them. And that really is not true. In fact, I would have to say that virtually all of the tribes that are specifically represented like that are not major donors to the institution. So that was not the basis at all. The criteria, really, were giving geographical diversity, giving cultural diversity. We did do it in some cases where we had cultural linkages, where we knew people in the community—that was not irrelevant to us. If we were going to do it from a community curated standpoint, we had to kind of play to strength in that way, but that was not a political consideration. That's a quite legitimate cultural criterion, if you will.

ac: Did you have any particular response to the American Indian Movement's press release?

rw: Well, their response was that it was not enough of a holocaust museum, right? Well that, I think, I responded to earlier. And I'm very respectful of that, again, but what I did find is that when I was just looking at the particulars of some of the people who were being quoted, they hadn't even been in the museum, hadn't actually seen it. And it's very difficult for me, as a specific matter, to say that you can walk through *Our Peoples* and not have some sense of the holocaust that was visited on us. If you're talking about the broader proposition of whether it should be *only* a holocaust museum, that we made a specific choice not to do, and I stand by that. Because I think it is a much larger story that we are trying to tell.

ac: And I think you have mostly responded to this next question, but just to give you a specific chance in case you'd like, is there anything you would like to say in regard to the early national press reviews?

rw: Well, the early national press was overwhelmingly favorable, even the critical reviews, some were very favorable. I don't know if you've seen it . . . but the *Wall Street Journal* did an excellent review of both the building and the exhibitions, and I invite you to take a look if you have not seen it already. But it simply begins by saying, and this was done two months after we opened, because she said she wanted to see it a couple of times before she settled on it . . . and she says in the review, "It's time somebody reviewed this museum and its exhibitions based upon what is actually there and what the museum is trying to say rather than on

the basis of what a particular critic expected to see when he or she walked into the building.” And then she said—it headlines it—but I think it’s perfectly acceptable that she says, “If you go to the National Museum of the American Indian expecting to see an art museum, it failed. If you got to the National Museum of the American Indian expecting . . . it was a substantial success.”

My view of the critical commentary—I have about three comments. One is I take all critics seriously. I can see that there are things we can do better, especially when you’re talking about methodologies that are new and that have not been tested that much in museums, and we’ll continue to work on them. At the same time, I think, second, a number of those critics, didn’t see what was actually there, the paradigmatic framework that they come from is so hardened in a way that they have no capacity for kind of breaking free of it and seeing something in new museological terms rather than old ones. And third, that if some critics were willing to be more open to a shift in the museological paradigm, it sets the stage and initiates the possibilities of an immensely important intellectual and museological discussion and dialogue that should occur and that I intend to pursue with vigor.

My 2005 speech—because I can only write one year, which basically gets iterated in various ways depending upon the audience—is going to be on exactly that. In other words, it’s going to begin with that—well, that story I told you about the woman who said “something else is going on here”—and proceed from there to try to spin out, in both intellectual and museological terms, what it is that is going on there. Because I think we need to . . . , completely apart from what we may revise or say on the exhibit floor trying to explain ourselves better there, go to other places.

I’m going to try to insinuate myself right into the American Anthropological Association annual meeting this year for exactly that reason. . . . It’s not that I’m simply defending us, that’s not the idea. It’s that much longer haul, bigger picture I’m interested in because, I think, after fifteen years, that I do have a far better understanding intellectually and museologically of what it is the National Museum of the American Indian is about, and I think it is a worthy shift in paradigm, and I want it to be understood even better going forward.

ac: In conclusion, is there any part of your work that you would identify as the most satisfying?

rw: I’ve been a happy camper all the way along. I know, every time somebody asked me, “What was your major disappointment?” I think, gosh, it will sound too Pollyannish if I said I’ve never been disappointed. It’s been a significant personal journey for me. This particular undertaking on my part, pulled together every strand in my own experience from my artist father to my non-Native mother to my own upbringing to my career as a lawyer to my interest in Native arts. All of that came together in this position, even more so as a very happy

practicing lawyer. It has been a journey for Native America and for the Americas, and I think my judgment is correct, and if it is, then that makes me very happy. . . .

AC: If you had to sum up one thing that you would really like visitors of the NMAI, Native and non-Native, to learn, what would it be?

rw: This concept of survivance. Because what sits there, everything else that we've talked about sits there. If you accept and understand the notions of survivance, then you understand the historical challenges that precede that survivance. But you also understand the contemporary presence of Native peoples and cultures in this hemisphere. That is the overriding concept, and that means that you do look at things in different ways. One of the other critics . . . got very upset about that fact that Tohoono O'Odham, in talking about the three most significant events in their history, made reference to a health march that they had, you know, about two years ago. He said, "What can they possibly mean by that? How can that possibly be the one of the most significant events in their history?" And yet when you think of it in terms of contemporary life—diabetes, obesity, fatality rates, disease incidents—there's *every* reason. That again is turning this very paradigm on its head because you learn different things, not just about the objects but about all of culture if you're willing to take it in those terms, and that is connoted by this term "survivance" and what sits there. . . .

AC: Is there anything that you would like for readers of this journal to think about?

rw: Yes, what I think readers of this journal should think about are the very important, truly important, intellectual and museological questions that come out of the National Museum of the American Indian because that is where the real discussion should be, and that's where our real discussion is; I mean that's what we're trying to do at the NMAI, and that's a discussion that should engage scholars all across the board, every discipline, anywhere, because it gives you a sense of what museums as institutions are. It gives you many changing perceptions of what it means to create, make, record, and articulate history. All of those things are subsumed in that conversation. So what I really want is for us to talk about that. You know, the museum is about conversations. That's the way we do exhibits; we need to have a conversation about the big picture too.

AC: And, now that the doors have finally opened, what are the next phases for the NMAI? Is there something coming down the pike that we should be looking for?

rw: Well, I think, here's the way I see it: I had originally said that if I had my druthers, I would lift off that terrace on the fifth floor by helicopter the day after the museum opened and fly away, as it were. I've decided not to for some very small practical reasons, including my boss. I told it to her . . . it was my first evaluation with her like three or four years ago, and I said, "You know, I really think

the big mistake,” and I do think this is still true, “is that founding directors stay there too long.” You know it’s often a different skill set, and they need to get out. And so I said that I planned to leave within months after the museum opens. There was this pregnant pause, and she leaned across the table and said, “I think that’s the most irresponsible thing I’ve ever heard you say.” And irresponsible from a very practical standpoint. When you open, and I know this now from having been open for four months or whatever it is, that so much spins out after you have opened.

So the reason I want to stay longer at this point, and I don’t mean forever, but indefinitely at this point, from the standpoint of the substance of this place and articulating it, in all kinds of circles, to audiences, to the scholarly community, I want to be there. Because I think I can do that, and I think I can lead, from our standpoint, that discussion in ways that are important. That has to do with substance and content and intellectual considerations.

But the second reason I want to stay there is because one thing I’ve become convinced of, and this is . . . I was always kind of the leader of the museum . . . others on a day-to-day basis understandably had more to do with running that place than I did. I’ve been blessed with incredibly good senior staff. I mean there’s no better museum in the Smithsonian in terms of the sheer quality of senior staff and other staff for that matter. But I’ve become convinced, over this fifteen-year period, that there’s a way in which museums as an organizational matter are structured that are totally out of whack with doing our work best. And it honestly conforms to ancient models that have their origins in the academy and that, I think, simply don’t work for a museum. All of our major projects are done in a much, in a very multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary way. And so I want to think a little bit about how we not only think of the substance of the museum of the twenty-first century but also think about the structures that are put in place to get that content most effectively expressed. So I want to stay there long enough to do that.

AC: Thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank Richard West for taking the time out of his busy schedule to talk with me.