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(Un)disturbing Exhibitions

Indigenous Historical Memory at the NMAI

MYLA VICENTI CARPIO

I was recently in Washington DC to visit the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). There, I found myself amid some of the most beloved and known monuments and museums in the “nation’s” capital. Every year, people flock to see these monuments to former leaders, to visit museums and gain a specific perspective of U.S. history. Most monuments act as conspicuous bookmarks in American history, embedding certain historical events, figures, or places in the nation’s collective memory. Places such as the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial in DC or the Statue of Liberty in New York attract visitors from around the world to pay homage to these assumed great leaders and the freedoms they represent. However, when we look at monuments and museums, we must also understand the different meanings these monuments represent for multiple publics.

I arrived in the District of Columbia with a different perspective, one critical of the impacts of European and American imperialism on Indigenous peoples. As I visited different memorials, monuments, and museums in DC, I was struck by the patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric, all the while remembering the countless Indigenous lives lost or affected by this nation’s expansion. I witnessed the different publics visiting monuments and bringing with them their own awareness or investment of that particular historical memory. When different publics traverse monuments or spaces, conflicting historical memories likewise intersect and reveal underlying tensions and conflicting interpretations about the past.

Caroline Chung Simpson, in *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945–1960*, suggests that Japanese American identity and internment constituted an “absent presence” in post–World

War II American society. Her work seeks to understand “how history and memory are negotiated when the need to remember an event challenges the ideals of democratic nationalism and the narrative unity of nation that historical discourses ostensibly provide.”¹ The “absence,” or deliberate exclusion, of the “other’s” history works to construct and reify the master narrative, as does the utilization of a historical “presence,” or inclusion, that only benefits the dominant narrative. Indigenous history, I suggest, is situated as *the* “absent presence” in American history, deliberately erased or radically transformed to maintain the master narrative. Its discursive inclusion, a retelling or distortion of Indigenous history is designed to justify the colonizers’ violence and exploitation of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. The processes of colonization have created this “absence” in the American historical memory, which shapes how Indigenous history, space, or place have been and continue to be renamed, redefined, and destroyed.

Museums in particular are educational tools used to create and perpetuate specific ideologies and historical memories. They have played a prominent role in defining the visibility of Indigenous peoples and cultures in America historical memory by creating exhibits of Indigenous peoples based on perceptions and views that benefit and justify American colonialism. As an elementary school student, I learned about the damaging representations of Indigenous peoples in museum exhibitions during a class visit to the Denver Museum of Natural History. We viewed the museum’s American Indian exhibit, which depicted Natives as scantily clad, uncivilized savages carrying spears and bows and arrows. This had an enormous impact on me. I knew where I came from and who I was—that we were not as they depicted—and I stood there as students, knowing I was Indigenous, looked at me, at the exhibit, and back at me. I cried from the hurt and humiliation I felt as some of the students laughed. My teacher was unsympathetic to my hurt and objections to such imagery. Through this experience, I gained firsthand knowledge of the tenuous relationships museums have with their publics, especially the Indigenous peoples of America.

As with the Denver Museum of Natural History of the 1970s, many museums dehumanize Indigenous peoples with their exhibits. These museums, private and public, teach “America” that Indigenous peoples are peoples of the past who never “progressed” forward. Dehumanizing exhibits of Indigenous peoples with and among animals dramatically

contrast with those of Europeans and Americans who are portrayed as making progress in the chronological narrative of human development and nation building. With many national and international museum visitors accustomed to envisioning Indigenous peoples in such contexts, the NMAI faces an enormous task: to shift the paradigm from Indigenous peoples as exhibition subjects, to educate the different publics visiting the museum about the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and, importantly, to make Indigenous history “present.”

It is clear by the video in the Our Peoples gallery that the NMAI curators understand the long history of misrepresentation. The video’s narrator states, “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. It’s a dizzying spectrum of impressions deeply embedded fiercely held, hard to dislodge. They’ve been fixed in our minds, by histories taught in classrooms, generation after generation.”² The NMAI indeed has an ambitious goal in educating a largely ignorant public, and the opening statements seem to affirm the importance of historicizing European and American colonization and its impacts on Indigenous peoples. Its purpose seems clear: to inform, educate, and, from an Indigenous perspective, contradict what the American public has been taught. Yet the NMAI, rather than fulfilling this imperative, only shies away from the challenge.

The opening images of the film presentation *Who We Are*, showing in the Lelawi Theater begin to illustrate that Indigenous peoples are distinct peoples showing complexities in the peoples and cultures from around the country. Moreover, *Our Universes* attempts to illustrate the multiplicity of Indigenous worldviews. The first panel that the visitor encounters upon entering this section states,

You’ll 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 animals, plants, spirit world and the people around us. *In Our Universes, you’ll encounter Native people from the Western Hemisphere who continue to express this wisdom in ceremonies, celebrations, language, arts, religions, and daily life.* (emphasis added)

The emphasized sentences focuses on those who “continue” these traditions. Some visitors clearly engaged with the exhibits in *Our Universes*

and overheard a woman stating, “I didn’t realize how different each tribe was” after leaving the Anishinaabe exhibit. This is important to the museum’s mission to “celebrate the lifeways, languages, literature, history, and art of Native Americans,” survival and “survivance.”³ However, the museum never tells us exactly how many nations existed and still exist in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, which is especially important when trying to express how they are surviving and what from.

The museum’s strengths are evident in the beauty of the architecture and landscape and the exhibitions created by Indigenous communities; however, by not providing visitors with more context or information about what they are viewing, the museum perpetuates longstanding distortions of Indigenous peoples. These distortions about American Indians were evident by the conversations and comments I overheard visitors make throughout the museum: “Yea, we’re here smoking a peace pipe”; “I want to take you where they teach you to do Indian dances.” These visitors brought with them images of American Indians as making peace with the U.S. military or performing dances for tourists, images that could remain intact after walking through the museum.

In particular, one family’s interpretation of the bronze statue by Edward Hlavka *Allies in War, Partners in Peace, 2004*, a gift from the Oneida Nation, poignantly illustrates how the visiting public carries and maintains colonized conceptions of American Indian and the museum’s failure to challenge these colonized conceptions. Hlavka’s statue provides a powerful depiction of the relationship between the Oneida Nation and the newly formed United States during the American Revolution. The Oneidas helped to “sustain” the revolutionaries by supplying food and wartime alliances. The statue depicts Polly Anderson carrying a basket of corn, with the information plaque explaining that she taught the soldiers how to cook the corn. Oskanondonha is depicted illustrating the role he played as an ally with the Americans. George Washington is shown holding a wampum belt of their agreement to not “interfere in the other’s internal affairs.” The three stand at the white pine, the tree of peace with weapons buried and the different clans of the Haudenosaunee. The information plaque explains the statue with a brief discussion of the Peace Keeper and the Tree of Peace. The piece emphasizes the Oneidas’ relationship with the American revolutionaries and places Haudenosaunee understandings of peace and negotiation second. Moreover, the information plaque does not clarify how the United States not only did not

adhere to the agreement but went on to treat these “allies” as “conquered peoples,” stealing their lands.

The family members never read this information and instead interpreted the cultural and historical intricacies based on their preconceived notions from textbook interpretations of European, American, and Indigenous relations:

“What do you see?”

“Yes, an Indian.”

“What is she carrying?”

“Yes, that’s corn.”

“Yes, that’s a pilgrim wearing that hat.”

“What is this?”

“Yes, it’s thanksgiving.”

A parent asked her children these questions and rather than walking away with a new or different understanding of a nation or international relations, the family imposed their colonial conception of Thanksgiving—the most dominant and perhaps the most romanticized image of Indigenous-colonial relations—onto this statue.

As an Indigenous visitor to the museum, I also found that I became part of the spectacle. Since I possess phenotypical characteristics of an “Indian” (black hair, dark skin), many visitors halted their conversation when I walked into the exhibit areas or interrupted their conversation until they walked past me. I witnessed these reactions several times. It was as if my humanity disrupted their ability to observe Indigenous life and culture from a distance. Tellingly by their actions, many visitors were more comfortable encountering the artifacts than they were engaging with an Indigenous person other than museum cultural interpreters. Thus, the NMAI fails to disturb preconceived notions of history and the “dizzying spectrum of impressions” that the general public carries with them into the museum.⁴

In an interview with National Public Radio prior to the opening of the museum, W. Richard West Jr., the founding director, said he wanted visitors to get a “clear understanding, not just of tragedies, but a broader sweep of time and space of the first citizens of the Americas.”⁵ The lack of historical context, moreover, is presented as positive and progressive, with the museum’s director proudly noting, “we are not retrospective. We live in the present and we look toward the future.”⁶ (Looking “to

the future” does not explain why the museum continues to use the term “tribe” rather than “nation,” which many Indigenous nations have now chosen in order to emphasize their sovereignty.) West tellingly noted that Indigenous peoples’ history spans twenty thousand years and that the worst of it has been 5 percent of that history.⁷ This does not explain, then, why the museum’s chronology begins in 1491 in the Our Peoples gallery focusing on tribal histories, misleading visitors to assume that Indigenous peoples only came into existence when they entered European consciousness. The NMAI ostensibly devotes a majority of its exhibits to celebrating Indigenous peoples’ survival of over five hundred years of violence and genocide. Clearly, then, colonization has had a much greater impact upon our history, one that extends beyond those thousand years.

The “5 percent solution” of minimizing the discussion of colonization, especially within a historical context, thus centers colonialism as the “absent presence” in the NMAI. Conspicuously absent from the museum’s presentation is a clear critique of colonization and its impacts on Indigenous lifeways, religions, and cultures. Although sections in the museum mention colonialism and cultural interpreters use language referencing colonization, a clear sense of who the colonizers are is lacking. As an absent presence, it does not disturb the preconceived notions of different publics and the American historical memory.

Yet, while the exhibits’ focus on survival illustrates the resiliency and continuation of Indigenous peoples, the lack of historical context begs the question, survival from what?

Confronting colonization, according to the NMAI, interferes with the mission to celebrate the Native American survival and survivance. It is precisely this ahistoricism that undermines the museum’s mission. Historical context and critique play an important role in educating the general public about Indigenous history. If the museum is to change the paradigm by which the public perceives Indigenous peoples, providing a clear historical context is part of that educational process. It is imperative that Indigenous history from an Indigenous perspective be made “present” in our own communities and within the American historical record.

The absence of colonization and empire throughout the museum renders the actual presentation of colonialism most problematic. In the exhibit *We Are the Evidence*, colonialism is described as a “storm” com-

prised of three sides (exhibits)—rifles, books and Bibles, and treaties. The exhibit situates Indigenous communities at the center of this colonial storm, the calm of the storm. With colonization placed as the absent presence, these exhibits lack a historical context that informs or explains the continuing impacts of colonization and ignores the continuing presence of colonization in our lives. Moreover, these exhibits do little to disturb colonial rhetoric, notions, and history of Indigenous peoples. Rather, they maintain Indigenous absence or fascination in the American historical memory.

That the curators had difficulty mapping colonization onto the museum's celebration of survivance is clear when one considers the physical arrangement of the Storm exhibit. Three cases, the Guns, Books and Bibles, and Treaties, face outward, outside the Storm walls. The Storm represents the colonizer's destructive forces, and the walls fashion a sort of circular, enclosed, center space, the eye of the storm. At the center sits a round, glass case with red and black cloth containing rocks, a feather fan, a staff, seeds, and a cowboy hat. The curators provide no explanation for this cryptic symbol of a drum, but visitors standing in that space are surrounded by television monitors playing tornado and hurricane storm footage with sounds of thunderstorms piped from the speakers above. The assumption is that it symbolizes the spirituality and culture of Indigenous peoples that have survived and withstood the storm. While this exhibit does raise for consideration the enormous destruction and violence colonization wrought upon Indigenous peoples, the "calm of the storm" wrongly implies minimal or unsustained affect. Furthermore, storms are produced not by humans but by nature. The tools of colonization—Bibles, books, distorted views of civilization, and treaties—appear suspended or floating in nearby cases, which might imply that humans did not have a hand in wielding these tools but that it was an inevitability for cultures to collide.

Although the guns exhibit mentions that Europeans and Americans used the guns on Indigenous peoples, without a historical context many of these incidents seem like individual confrontations and not an ideologically driven campaign to eradicate Indigenous peoples. The Pepperbox panel, for instance, states that "Native women suffered abuse during the gold rush and Indians who intervened on their behalf were shot." Unfortunately, it appears as though women only suffered during the gold rush by greedy miners when, in fact, European and American colonizers

systemically utilized violence against women and men in their colonization of Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources.

Guns had an enormous impact on Indigenous peoples through trade, war, and resistance, yet the display of these “historical” rifles plays into the general public’s fascination and image of Indians as warmongers and savages in western movies. The display highlights those firearms through the twentieth century that are infamous within American allure and memory such as the Sioux (not Lakota, Dakota, or Nakota) and Geronimo and Apaches. Rather than disrupt popular stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, this display seems to confirm the American mythology that the West, and its Indigenous inhabitants, had to be tamed and civilized.

The ambiguous wording of the Storm exhibit intentionally allows multiple readings. One panel explains that guns and Christianity “weave a thread of shared experience” among Indigenous peoples. While this is true, it is also true that Indigenous peoples shared the struggle to survive against the guns and Christianity wielded as weapons by the colonizing governments of Spain, France, England, and the United States. Europeans and Americans utilized guns and Christianity as weapons and in their rational to invade, colonize, steal, and commit genocide on Indigenous peoples.

The books and Bibles on display are described as representing the “tireless efforts to convert indigenous peoples,” overlooking the brutal impact and destruction Christianity and Western education has had on Indigenous peoples and maintaining colonization as the absent presence. Among the many unmentioned facts include how Franciscan priests used slave labor to build the churches and missions or how they were complicit in the murders of Indigenous peoples, especially religious leaders. The statement that more than half of Indigenous peoples today are Christian demonstrates the extent of this storm, yet they omit any discussion about Indigenous religions within this context. Ignoring this fundamental aspect of Indigenous communities only further silences the voices and those who resisted and fought for our survival.

The final third of this trilogy, *Treaties*, again lacks the historical context that leaves visitors without an understanding of the extent of American legal incursion into Indigenous lives. The language used on the exhibit panels misleads visitors by focusing on treaties as markers of friendship between nations more than legal agreements between sovereign nations. Without a discussion of imperialism and colonization, the public is left

with little knowledge of how these treaties are colonizing tools, used to steal Indigenous lands and oppress Indigenous peoples on all levels of their societies. The exhibit, then, emphasizes U.S. power over Indigenous peoples and lends little knowledge about the difficult decisions our leaders made or to the understanding of Indigenous nations' sovereign status.

The lack of comprehensible discussion about sovereignty, from an Indigenous perspective, does not disturb the general public's inadequate understanding of Indigenous sovereignty, nor does it reinforce Indigenous self-determination (sovereignty). The Treaty of Ft. Harmar states, "the treaty *allowed* the Wyandot, Delaware, Ottawa, Chippewa (Ojibwe), Potawatami, and Sauk Indians to hunt on the territory they ceded, but limited their commercial dealings to traders licensed by the U.S." (emphasis added).⁸ What is sovereignty if another nation is *allowing* activities and their commerce? Treaties are another tool of the colonial process to destroy Indigenous claims to land and resources. Yet, the United States broke these treaties.

When I lecture in Intro to American Indian Studies and Law, Policy, and American Indians, it takes more than a few slides to get across the clear understanding of sovereignty for Indigenous peoples and how it is played out today. The text panels in the treaty case do not illustrate the extent to which Indigenous lands were stolen, rights usurped, and true self-determinations lost. The exhibits at the NMAI exclude discussions on how many of these treaties were, in fact, the results of coercive negotiations. Again, the lack of historical context limits the understanding of Indigenous nations today and why Indigenous peoples must continue fighting for fishing and hunting rights, access to lands, and constantly justify gaming as a sovereign right.

The museum also does not clearly address its multiple publics. The primary public for the museum is the "American" public, those individuals that have mostly only heard the "American" history perspective. It is this public that will mostly come to the museum. What is absent only makes more conspicuously present the apologist mission of the NMAI that refuses to disrupt the mythologies of the noble and savage Indian.

After all, we still exist. The NMAI claims to celebrate our survivance while simultaneously ignoring whether it adequately addresses its Indigenous publics. With its opening exhibits the museum has squandered the opportunity to educate Indigenous peoples and provide leadership

for long-lasting change by providing a much-needed critical perspective of dominant historical narratives supported with facts, documents, and alternative interpretations. For Indigenous peoples, what needs to be presented is a picture of a decolonized future. In order to decolonize our own perspectives and values—in order to “look forward”—it is necessary to first understand how imperialism and colonialism have impacted us in the past and present. It is not that the focus should only be on colonization but that colonization must be present and critiqued. Although some Indigenous leaders may fear that this hindsight will be interpreted as a form of victimization, we must look at the past in order to move forward. History indeed bears this out: colonizers invaded our lands and stole and exploited resources while committing genocide on millions of Indigenous peoples. What is at stake for those who have colonized and benefited from colonization is the ability to ignore the colonial past and negate the Indigenous past. What is at stake for Indigenous people is our future—not simply survival in the present.

Making Indigenous history “present” is an important mission for Indigenous peoples and scholars. Wilma Mankiller, former principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, in a recent speech at the Tulsa Press Club spoke about “misunderstandings about tribes [as] a problem.”⁹ Speaking about the need to change the perceptions many Americans hold about American Indians, she remarked that it would have a more positive impact on tribal and non-Indian relationships and policies. With one million visitors in its first five months, the NMAI could have a dramatic impact upon public policy. Because of her position, Mankiller’s statement is more readily reported or publicized, yet many Indigenous scholars, community members, activists, and others have called for reclaiming and rewriting of Indigenous history, history that not only reclaims but also critiques imperialism and colonialism and their impacts on Indigenous worldviews, cultures, and existences.¹⁰

The dehumanizing processes of colonization continue to have far-reaching impacts on Indigenous life and on America society. Many of the social problems attributed to reservation life or Indigenous existence result from the legacy of conquest and colonization. Indigenous scholar Lisa Poupart notes that

virtually nonexistent in traditional tribal communities prior to European invasion, contemporary American Indian communities

struggle with devastating social ills including alcoholism, family violence, incest, sexual assault, fetal-alcohol syndrome, homicide, and suicide at startling rates similar to and sometimes exceeding those of white society.¹¹

In addition to poverty, depression, diabetes, cancers, and a myriad of other ills, many of our peoples have internalized oppression, withdrawing from, resisting, and condemning traditional forms of knowledge, to mirror their views with colonizing ideologies.

Indeed, one particular exhibit demonstrates that the NMAI has the ability to educate Indigenous audiences on decolonization, as well as the general public. The Tohono O'odham display, *Desert Walk for Health, 2000*, is an interactive, multimedia presentation that illustrates the importance of traditional desert foods, not only for the health of the Tohono O'odham people, but also the importance of the use of the foods. The exhibit's video explains the walk:

In March 2000, the Tohono O'odham Indians walked 240 miles to the Sonoran desert to Mexico from Tucson. The purpose, to raise awareness about diabetes which afflicts many of our people. We also wanted to promote the use of traditional desert foods and medicinal plants. We were once a healthy people that ran, walked, and worked in the fields. We didn't have tv. We didn't sit a lot. Now we have to do drastic things like walk 240 miles in the desert to make our people realize that many of our illness come from not eating healthy. Our people have to get back to eating foods from the desert.

Walking 240 miles raised attention among the Tohono O'odham community about the impacts of colonization and a renewed impetus for traditional elder knowledge and traditional relationships with the desert environment.

Even here, though, the historical context is lacking that would provide a better understanding of why the Tohono O'odham diet and lifestyles so drastically changed. For example, they do not talk (at length) about the forced confinement that makes it difficult to continue traditional running. Even more important, they do not address the theft of water that restricted traditional farming. Losing the river impacted agriculture,

health, and culture, not to mention the dramatic shift of the biodiversity with loss of the river.

This exhibit also acknowledges and critiques how European and American colonization has impacted cultures, lives, and health and encourages Indigenous peoples to search for solutions within our traditional, cultural contexts.

Elders have been saying for a long time that diabetes is a symptom of losing touch with the O'odham (humdag). These foods will allow us to return to a state of wellness. In speaking to school children over the years, many of them at first thought that eating the traditional foods, the desert foods was taking a step backwards, and I've reminded them "actually no, we are taking a step forward back to where we should be. We took a step backwards when we [were] eating the Western diet foods."

Significantly, this statement rejects the linear narrative of progress that the director has imposed upon the NMAI. Assumed progress of European foods is rejected, recognizing that our traditional foods have important nutritional and cultural value. Additionally, without victimization, the Tohono O'odham are clear about the impact Spanish colonialism and Catholicism had on them as a people. Rather than taking a step backward, returning to Indigenous technologies and knowledge about foods and medicines allows the Tohono O'odham to do more than simply survive. Moving beyond the concept of simply surviving within colonization pushes us toward empowerment through decolonization.

Thus, much more than policy relationships are at stake by transforming "American" misconceptions of Indigenous peoples. Retelling and reclaiming our Indigenous histories and images can transform Indigenous lives, self-esteem, health, and empowerment. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson has called for "reclaiming our humanity . . . to restore health and prosperity to our people by returning to traditions and ways of life that have been systematically oppressed."¹² Importantly, our histories illustrate that Indigenous peoples have legitimate claims and rights to lands, culture, and religious freedoms. So, how does one teach a public whose knowledge of Indigenous peoples has mostly derived from racist, dehumanizing images, movies, academy awards performances, mascots, and museums, among many others about five hundred plus years of colonization? Individuals who understand the tenuous history of Indigenous

peoples and museums, or who have gone to museums and recognized dehumanizing exhibits, comprehend that building a museum with a different perspective—one that differs from traditionally Eurocentric perspectives—is a realistic and necessary goal. It is vital that Indigenous communities freely discuss (and even debate) the history and impacts of colonization to begin healing and move toward the decolonization of Indigenous peoples. Taken in a different direction, the NMAI can be a space to bring Indigenous peoples together to reflect upon our history, transform our communities, heal, and thrive.

NOTES

1. Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Post-war American Culture, 1945–1960*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 4.
2. *We Are the Evidence*, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC.
3. National Museum of the American Indian Pamphlet, Washington DC.
4. *We Are the Evidence*.
5. Juan Williams, “American Indian Museum Prepares for Opening,” *NPR Morning Edition*, March 26, 2004.
6. Philip Burnham, “A Place of Reconciliation: Talking with W. Richard West” *Indian Country Today* July 14, 2004.
7. Williams, “American Indian Museum Prepares for Opening.”
8. “The Treaty of Ft. Harmar” National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC
9. S. E. Ruckman, “Perception Key for Indians,” *Tulsa World*, March 15, 2005.
10. See Taiiike Alfred, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, Winona Wheeler, Lisa Poupart, Vine Deloria Jr., Michael Yellow Bird.
11. Lisa Poupart, “A Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression Among American Indians,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 88.
12. Angela Cavender Wilson, “Reclaiming Our Humanity,” in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, ed. Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 71.