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Isaac, Gwyneira, 1966-

The American Indian Quarterly, Volume 30, Number 3&4, Summer/Fall 2006, pp. 574-596 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: [10.1353/aiq.2006.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2006.0025)



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What Are Our Expectations Telling Us?

Encounters with the NMAI

GWYNEIRA ISAAC

I had two vastly dissimilar encounters with the inaugural exhibits at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington DC during its celebratory opening in September 2004. My first encounter was at the reception for museum staff, consultants, and their families, where I was accompanied by a group of anthropologists and museologists who were animated with anticipation for what they hoped would be a landmark series of exhibits and a turning point in Native American museology. As a group of people whose lives are clearly defined by museums, we were at home analyzing the architecture and displays. During our critique, however, we discovered that a number of features confounded us and thwarted our understanding of the goals of the exhibits, providing stimulating discussions and an immense amount of intellectual and critical fodder for future examination and research.

My second visit was with an enthusiastic colleague who accompanied me in the small hours of the morning on the first day the museum was made accessible to the public. The museum stayed open through the night to accommodate the large groups of visitors who had flocked to this new and significantly visible personality on the Mall. On this occasion, I found the museum to be a welcoming beacon alight in the otherwise still night, the entrance dome pulsating with singing and the galleries alive with hundreds of families enjoying a midnight adventure. During this second visit, we spent less time analyzing the exhibits and more on conferring about the palpable sense of a shared public experience and the performance of history here in Washington DC. This late-night journey through the museum was so markedly different from my first encounter two days earlier that I felt impelled to write not only on

the exhibits themselves but also on what we bring to them as visitors. I wanted to explore how the stories museums tell us are not just presented in the exhibits; their social meanings are created by the intersection of curators, audiences, media, and scholars who publicize, frame, and ultimately layer varied interpretations of the exhibits. While curators may aim to communicate particular meanings, we need to develop a framework for understanding how exhibits are experienced that allows for the co-construction of meaning between curators and their audiences. To further complicate things, all of these players may identify with or use different knowledge systems and approaches to knowledge, therefore requiring a nuanced framework that recognizes how these systems differ or overlap.

The opening of the NMAI also offers an unprecedented opportunity to look at how Native Americans have chosen to tell their stories in a national venue and to consider how museum experiences are performances of history, where audiences play a crucial role in determining how these histories create meaning at a broader social level. The aim of this article is to move beyond issues of representation and to address how museum meanings are made on the ground in ongoing encounters between displays and the ideational worlds their audiences bring with them into the museum space. In particular, I will explore how contrasting expectations about exhibits can serve as an interpretive strategy to identify co-existing but distinctly different approaches to knowledge that operate within the museum space. My explorations are based on four different encounters with the NMAI. The initial two encounters are visits to the museum itself, and the following two are experiences with the museum through newspaper articles and discussions. To give an interesting twist to James Clifford's travel diary of four Northwest coast museums, I have written this as a personal reflection on four encounters with the same museum, showing the open-ended and fluid nature of histories and the ongoing processes we use to make sense of contrasting expectations, experiences, and knowledge systems.¹

In effect, I am considering where the locus of meaning in museum exhibits is situated. Is it in the exhibit itself or in the mind of the viewer? An analogous and appropriate framework for examining the construction of meaning comes from the interpretation of photography.² Although a deceptively simple medium that materializes an index of reality, photographs require a complex framework of interrogation in order for us to

wholly grasp our relationship with these human-made simulacra of the world and how our perceptions of the world are, in turn, determined by photographs themselves. Photographs can also be seen as agents of change by transforming our perception of the passage of time and change itself and therefore our ideas about reality.³ We now consider the locus of meaning within photographs to be between the creator, the world, and the viewer in the dynamic process of the co-construction of meaning. Elizabeth Edwards's work on our assumptions about photographs and their use in exhibits helps us to consider the extent to which we can interpret the co-construction of meaning that takes place between viewer and museum displays.⁴ She argues that there is a "nexus of genre, expectancy and performance" that is "used within the exhibit context to generate a preferred reading of the exhibition or specific objects within it."⁵ The implication is that expectations about particular genres may be created as a tacit concordance between the perspectives of the curators and the public.⁶ This process results in what I will refer to here as genres of expectancy that are preferred ways of doing things and that are easily recognized by an intended audience. I will use the concept of genres of expectancy to examine the different approaches to knowledge and how these may determine the co-construction of meaning between curators and audiences at the NMAI.

While reviewing this article, colleagues asked me two questions about genres of expectancy that I want to address at this point. Firstly, are the genres determined by the curators' preferences or by the expectations held by their audience? I have specifically chosen the term "genre" to refer to an arena in which there are shared assumptions about the ways of doing things, in the same way "style" may be understood as a shared aesthetic. In acknowledging the diversity of perspectives, we know it is impossible for curators to meet the needs of all members of their audience; however, genres of expectancy can be used to identify the groups created where the expectations of audience members and curators overlap. Secondly, I was questioned if genres of expectation are acted out by the curator in anticipation of how exhibits are read by a specific audience? Genres of expectancy do reflect how curators choose target audiences and anticipate how they will interpret an exhibit. More important, however, genres of expectancy are not just preferred ways of doing things; they are also preferred ways of seeing the world and are therefore linked to the particular system or systems of knowledge adhered to by the cura-

tor and his or her audience. I have also chosen the term “expectancy” because it implies a mental state that brings together judgments of past, present, and future performances of someone or something. Thus, the study of expectations allows us to look at the layering of meanings within a temporal context.

Although we may agree upon accepted and recognized genres of expectancy, we must also consider that the meaning or interpretation of an exhibit may not be so easily controlled or limited. It has already been established that a dissonance of intended meanings can occur between curators and their audiences, as in the case of the controversial exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum.⁷ In this exhibit curators used nineteenth-century posters originally designed as propaganda, which depicted European colonialism as a beneficent patriarchal society. The curators’ intent had been to alert audiences to the power of racist social ideology to determine public policies. These posters in their contemporary Canadian context, however, aroused suspicion and anger from visitors who thought that they were displayed with the intention of supporting racist ideology. Similarly, there have been conflicts over the particular versions of history that should be communicated within an exhibit, as seen in the *Enola Gay* controversy at the Smithsonian.⁸ Through these experiences, the idea of new museology was developed with alternative practices, such as multi-vocal exhibits or community collaborations, which were designed to counteract the problems raised by conflicting ideas about authority.⁹ In the ongoing critique of museums, we have continually asked who has the authority to tell history. Often conflicts arise where the different portrayals of cultural viewpoints or the perspectives of different social classes are seen to collide uncomfortably within the museum space. The problem is perceived to be an issue of representation that can be somewhat solved by creating exhibits that incorporate multiple perspectives.¹⁰ Alternatively, it can also be solved through the development of displays or tribal museums that are founded and operated by the cultures themselves in a move toward self-representation.¹¹ By incorporating reflexive methods and community collaborations, curators imagine that they can co-construct meanings within exhibits before these displays are encountered by the public. While this is not a consciously articulated perspective, I would argue that curators are aiming to incorporate their target audiences’ viewpoints into the exhibits as a means of encouraging visitors to identify with the

displays, thus making them participants rather than observers. This approach, however, does not take into account how people do not merely translate exhibits using different perspectives on history but that they adhere to different knowledge systems and the resulting interpretations are also based on audiences' expectations about varied approaches to knowledge.

In the case of the NMAI, curators openly argued that they wanted to privilege Native Americans and therefore this particular target audience would determine the manner in which the exhibits communicate and are interpreted. Native Americans, however, do not adhere to a simple singular genre of expectancy for the interpretation of museums exhibits. While some may want to move away from anthropologically informed models, some expect a conventional, if not "traditional," museum. We need to uncover a complex range of contrasting expectations about museums in order to understand how the NMAI adheres to or creates new genres of expectancy. Although a detailed exploration of the broad range of expectations is beyond the scope of this article, I will focus on the mix of different approaches to knowledge from which new genres of expectancy now stem.

I am always drawn to thinking about the relationship between personal and collective histories and in particular the processes we use to locate ourselves in collective narratives. How do we identify with the historical narratives we find in exhibits and museums? In situating myself within this particular analysis of historical narrative at the NMAI, it is important to explain the origins of my interest in museums and how this journey has led me to look at the different approaches to knowledge. My research currently focuses on the A:shiwí A:wán Museum and Heritage Center in the pueblo of Zuni, New Mexico, and the ways in which this public institution mediates Euro-American and Zuni approaches to knowledge. In the early 1990s I met members of the Zuni Religious Advisory Team who were visiting the Peabody Museum at Harvard University as part of the consulting process for the repatriation of an *Ahayuda*, or Zuni War God. During this visit I learned that photographs of Zuni from the last century that were housed at the National Anthropological Archives had been duplicated and sent to the Zuni Museum. This duplicate collection provided a remarkable opportunity to examine how the same objects were curated in two different cultural contexts—within a local commu-

nity museum, the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center in Zuni, and in a national context at the Smithsonian Institution.

Between 1996 and 1998 I conducted eighteen months of fieldwork in the pueblo of Zuni, largely based at the A:shiwi A:wan Museum, during which time I learned of the complex origins of the museum and its relationship with the community. Knowledge in Zuni is compartmentalized into a complex series of esoteric religious societies, medicine lodges, and clans.¹² No individual has access to all of these societies, and esoteric knowledge is the responsibility of specific individuals who maintain it for the larger group. Expectations about the transmission of knowledge privilege transfer through oral tradition and initiation into esoteric religious societies. As a result, the Zuni Museum faced the challenge of mediating Euro-American and Zuni knowledge systems and defining what is permitted as public knowledge, both for uninitiated Zunis and for non-Zuni visitors. From my experiences in Zuni, I was forced to think about different systems of knowledge and how these may co-exist and, at times, operate independently from each other within a single institution such as the A:shiwi A:wan Museum.¹³ My analysis of the NMAI is a continuation of this research, drawing from experiences in Zuni and applying them to a broader examination of how different but concurrent systems of knowledge may operate at a national level.

Although the approaches to knowledge that are at play at the NMAI are numerous, I want to tease out two particular systems that I see as co-determinants in shaping both shared meanings as well as the underlying tensions present in the museum. The first of these two approaches is the concept of comprehensive knowledge, namely, the idea that knowledge "is singular, not plural, global and not local, that all knowledges . . . ultimately turn out to be concordant in one great system of knowledge."¹⁴ While this concept of knowledge harkens back to Enlightenment philosophies and nineteenth-century ideas about the stability of scientific data, it is still extremely influential within current ideational and organizational schemas. In the second concept, there is belief in the plurality of knowledges and knowledge systems heralded in by the critiques of the grand narratives of history and anthropology, as well as in sociology and the study of the complex construction of different social realities.¹⁵ While the plurality of knowledges schema can accommodate the concept of comprehensive knowledge as one particular system among many, the

ideas that structure notions about comprehensive knowledge negate the possibility of many independent systems functioning according to different organizational categories and logic.

My first encounter with the NMAI was framed within a very specific critical discourse on museums. Within this largely academic discourse and, as I shall explore here, genre of expectancy, we develop and interpret exhibits by looking for themes that provide coherence and an organizational framework, as well as question how these themes are used to communicate information to the public. The central concerns are the message of the exhibit and whether it is communicated successfully. However, we need to ask what are some of the criteria used within the critical academic discourse to determine if an exhibit is successful. In this realm, we tend to hold assumptions about the scholarly objectives of any project, and we critique exhibits on whether they reveal in-depth research and, more specifically, if they add new dimensions to the discipline in which the curator is seen to participate. I have used the term “we” here to specifically refer to those involved in the academic critique of museums, thus locating myself and my assumptions within this particular interpretation of museums. Critiques also center around how the exhibit engages with particular discourses, including the style of narrative and if it based on a singular authority or multiple voices. We question how the curator determines the relationship between objects and texts and if he or she intended for the objects to speak for themselves or to be contextualized or anchored by a text. Over the last two centuries, museologists, historians, and anthropologists have developed models not only of how museum exhibits should operate but also how they should be interpreted.¹⁶

For fear of oversimplifying the processes that go into the critique of exhibits, I want to provide an example that is not only from my personal experience but also offers a broader perspective on the evaluation of museum exhibits. When I first started my joint position as an assistant professor and museum director, I had numerous debates with colleagues, department chairs, and deans about the appraisal of exhibits in the tenure process. These discussions were informative because they helped me reach a more nuanced view of the relationship between academia and museums. Some argued that a book would be more highly regarded than an exhibit, while others suggested exhibits were important but that they must travel nationally in order to be considered the public dissemination

of research. Many suggested that I needed to prove that the exhibit had been peer reviewed—so as to show that the knowledge displayed was acceptable to a specialist audience. Although people presented different ideas about how to evaluate exhibits, all agreed an exhibit should have an accompanying publication in order to show in-depth research and how this contributed to the discipline. This particular “reading” of exhibits privileged textual over visual dissemination of knowledge, a point also made by Ruth Phillips, who argues that some view exhibits as “essentially ephemeral, performative, and ‘soft’”, versus knowledge in the academy, “the home of the book,” where knowledge is “essentially permanent, objectifiable and ‘hard.’”¹⁷

As I explored the NMAI on September 21, 2004, with my colleagues, I was acutely aware of the expectations that we shared stemming from this academic discourse on museums. Our first impression was awe at the magnitude of the NMAI project—the building, the media, and the political parading. During this first encounter, however, I never quite felt at home. Trying to understand the museum was like fiddling with the tuning dial on a radio and only picking up sound bites and static while looking for a clear signal. The grand entrance hall is breathtaking with its soaring domed roof and undulating walls, but the ground level of this space is partitioned awkwardly creating jarring barriers to the circular rotunda. Above you is an architectural analogy of the universe, but on the ground is a fractured and disjointed maze of barricades. Similarly, in the hallways between galleries are rolling wavelike walls juxtaposed with mundane corporate-carpet flooring. This reading of the building paralleled my interpretation of the museum as a whole—a universe made up of dissonant parts. I was also intrigued by the decision not to have a starting point for the museum and no clear distinction on how one should travel through the galleries. Should one travel from the top down or from the ground up?

The museum is made up of four floors of galleries, cafes, theatres, and stores. At the ground level is the grand entrance hall that is flanked by the Chesapeake Museum Store and the Mitsitam Café, which means “let’s eat” in the language of the Piscataway and Delaware peoples. Opposite the café is the large main theater space that will be used to show films and hold live performances. On the second floor there are staff offices and the Roanoke Museum Store that overlooks the rotunda. Above these on the third floor are two large exhibit spaces that showcase *Our Lives: Con-*

temporary *Life and Identities*, which explores the historic and contemporary forces that shape modern Native life, as well as a changing exhibit space that is currently showing *Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser*. There two more permanent exhibits on the fourth floor: *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shape Our World*, which looks at Native American philosophy and the relationship between humankind and the natural world, and *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*, which provides Native Americans the opportunity to tell their own histories. On the fourth floor there is also the *Lelawi Theater*, which seats 120 visitors and shows a thirteen-minute presentation on contemporary Native life. On both the third and fourth floors are glass cases, referred to as *Window on Collections: Many Hands, Many Voices*, that have typologically organized objects from the NMAI collections. The inaugural *Window* included categories such as beadwork, dolls, jars, peace medals, lithics, and baskets.

After our initial tour of the museum, my colleagues and I decided to join up again to hear everyone's thoughts on the exhibits. The first part of our conversation focused on the exhibit *Our Lives*, as we felt it was so dense with text that it would overwhelm the general public. It was also pointed out that there was not a clear organizational structure or guiding narrative and that the decision to have a multitude of voices was taken to the extremes of this particular museological practice so that the messages of the exhibit were scattered, disparate, and unguided. The unstructured approach to moving the visitor through the museum was mirrored in the lack of an overarching narrative in the majority of the exhibits. We also discussed the glass cases in the corridors, *Window on Collections*, and our surprise that while they were assembled according to basic themes such as beadwork or dolls, there were no labels or identification of the objects themselves. The only source of information was provided on computer screens perched on podiums in front of the cases—thus any curiosity about an object required the viewer to draw away from the object itself and to look into the virtual world of info-technology. This lack of labels appeared to go against any accepted museological principles concerning the educational purposes of museums. We concluded that knowledge in this space was seen by the curators as not transmitted through text but transferred visually and to be predicated on aesthetic judgments alone.

In particular, a window case on arrowheads became the focal point

of our conversation. This display consisted of a dramatic and beautiful arrangement of lithics, where a multitude of arrowheads were oriented in such a way as to make a swirling pattern that moved like a river, eddying, floating, and sweeping across a neutral background. There was no information in this case on the tools, no cultural or geographical regions of origin listed, and no accompanying dates indicating when they were made. While this lack of information confounded my colleagues, they were more concerned with the fact that the display resembled, if not mimicked, the decorative conventions of amateur collectors and their cabinets of curiosity of the nineteenth century. These cabinets were a tradition much criticized by Native Americans for their inability to demonstrate the values attributed to these tools by their creators. It was also a display technique re-evaluated in the 1920s by museologists and anthropologists, such as Franz Boas, who eventually developed new methods such as the diorama in order to contextualize objects by evaluating them according to use and social context rather than aesthetic values.

The exhibit everyone seemed more comfortable with was Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser. Many would consider this the most conventional of the four inaugural exhibits. Not only does it follow Morrison and Houser according to the chronology of their development as artists; there is also a single curatorial voice that guides the visitor through the exhibit. The development of each artist is explored according to their own lives, as well as according to the influences of various art movements and their contribution to the field. This exhibit style resonated with us as a familiar arena in which the intellectual architecture contextualizes the work within a larger body of knowledge. Our knowledge of this genre was also played out in our ability to understand directly the relationships between objects and texts as presented in the exhibit. While the spotlights focused on the objects and gave them center stage, there were texts providing the information many museum goers seek, such as biographical information and the date in which the art piece was made.

From my first encounter with NMAI, I developed the view that the exhibits created an ambiguous museological realm that resulted from a mixture of expectations about comprehensive and plural knowledges. The titles of the main inaugural exhibits are very telling: the first three, *Our Universes*, *Our Peoples*, and *Our Lives*, are comfortable with their celebration of the plurality of knowledges. Clearly, “*Our Universes*” im-

plies that there are not just different perspectives and voices but that in fact there are a multitude of different knowledge systems. Interestingly, the only title of the four exhibits that is not in the plural and does not use a possessive pronoun, is “Native Modernism,” and indeed this is the only exhibit that adheres to some of the accepted means of arranging knowledge within a singular and cohesive organizational structure. Moreover, the contrast in titles also suggests that the museum finds frameworks based on comprehensive knowledge less useful in the process of establishing identity politics than those based on the plurality of knowledges. This is not to argue that this exhibit merely places art within the Western discourse on art, because it provides a layered portrayal of the role of Hauser and Morrison both in Native American and Euro-American terms. The curator, however, uses two protagonists, Hauser and Morrison, to get the audience to think about what it takes to transcend both national and international boundaries as artists and, more specifically, as artists drawing on and exploring their Native histories and identities. While many visitors may not be conversant in the history of art, Native Modernism allows people to discover the ways in which these artists explored art movements, thus providing both the individual artist’s view of Native and non-Native worlds as well as relating this to a cross-cultural social history. This exhibit demonstrates how inevitably ideas about comprehensive knowledge and plural knowledges co-exist, but it finds a way to articulate the route through this terrain, showing how the work is located both within a singular body of knowledge on “art” as a Western category and that the sculptures and paintings also stem from and continue to circulate within specific Native systems of knowledge and meaning.

My second visit to NMAI was so strikingly different from the first that it became instrumental in leading me to question the various factors that go into the interpretation of exhibits. Specifically, it raised my awareness on the need to distinguish between the interpretation and experience of exhibits. My aim here is to provide a closer understanding of how these approaches differ or overlap and how we relate to or position ourselves in the production of knowledge(s) and the performances of public history. I would also argue that we do not interpret the meanings of exhibits only from the visit to the exhibit itself. Expectations created prior to experiencing an exhibit and discussions following our first encounter, as well

as subsequent visits to the exhibit, merge together to form a complex layering of experiences that determine how that exhibit will mean to us.

During this subsequent visit I concluded that this museum was indeed a complex creature with which I needed a second encounter in order to fully grasp its personality and eccentricities. You may be sure that the crowd of people visiting a museum at 2 a.m. is made up of dedicated museum goers or event enthusiasts. Within the entrance of the museum, music reverberated around the rotunda and resonated throughout the building and staircases, bringing people together to face inward toward the central performance arena. On this visit, I attended an introductory film that was projected in the Lelawi Theater. Although I have subsequently discussed the positive aspects of the film with my colleagues, during my first encounter with it, I found the film to be an oddly romantic depiction of nameless tribes that created a blurred view of pan-Indian identity. The performance of the film, however, created a positive dynamic among the audience. Placing forty or so museum visitors in a circular screening room where they can see each other generates a not unimportant or unrecognized cohort of people that now share this experience.

At the entrance is a vast undulating glass wall that displays a constellation of gold artifacts and figurines from the Aztec, Mayan, and Olmec cultures of Mesoamerica. During my first visit to the museum, I had been confounded by the fact that none of these objects were labeled and therefore formed a nebulous bundle of “things.” On my second visit, however, I was struck by the fact the purpose of the exhibit was not to inform the public on the intricacies of Mesoamerican arts and histories but to overwhelm and dazzle us with the basic concept of “gold” as a valuable and desirable metal. Similarly, this wall curves around further into the exhibit space, leading into a second wall display of weapons. In the course of my first encounter, these were merely unidentified swords, rifles, and pistols of conquerors, but in this second viewing they confronted me in their sheer quantity and iconographic value as symbols of “power.” Another wall is made up of Bibles translated into Native American languages, representing colonialism and assimilation, namely, the ideology of the colonists. The guest curator, Jolene Rickard, appeared to argue that the detailed dates and names of the invaders and their chronologies of victories may fade but that we still need to question how the

vestiges of their ideology continue to hold a significant place of iconographical and ideological power.

Our Peoples wants to elicit an emotive response from its audience about the experience of being colonized. While this is not necessarily a new genre of exhibits, what makes it more complicated is that the curators are also engaging with postmodern discourse on the history of colonialism—a discourse that stems from the academic critique of how history is created, constructed, and controlled. At the beginning of the exhibit there is a video performance curated by Paul Chaat Smith, which presents a narrator who refers to the process of “making history” and argues that “all histories have a history themselves, and one is incomplete without the other.” This ideology is firmly within postmodern and postcolonial discourses on the reflexivity and plurality of histories. The narrator states that in this gallery “we offer self-told histories.” This first portion of *Our Peoples* is not about a collaboration of Native American communities per se; it is about responding to the pre-existing European system of meaning and relocating Native voices into the discourses that reverse ideas about the colonized as victim. The exhibit exists not to give specific Native Americans a voice but to argue that history itself is subjective and that the Native experience of colonization cannot be understood until the nature of the varied histories themselves are understood.

As a result it compels us to consider how we view the various genres of expectancy associated with how history is performed in different cultural contexts. We are also thrown back onto our earlier exploration of comprehensive knowledge and plural knowledges but now with the understanding that the manner in which we tell our history or histories relies on these systems. We therefore need to ask if history is a cross-cultural category. While genre-specific interpretations and performances of the past do not transcend cultural systems of meaning, all cultural systems have ways of telling about or performing the past. In “A Poetic for History,” Greg Dening portrays different Euro-American vernacular genres. This appreciation of the different performances of the past introduces the idea that all cultures have diverse vernacular genres for telling past experiences, as well as more specialist and privileged genres and practitioners.¹⁸

In *Our Peoples* Jolene Rickart and Chaat Smith do not want us to learn the data that has been collected about Native American history;

they want us to question our ethnocentric ideas about history itself. With its lack of labels and guidance, the exhibit is deceptively simple. Its purpose, however, is exceedingly intricate and challenges commonplace ideas about history as a singular and shared experience. What should we make of this new genre that confounds people who want labels and textual guidance? Is it designed to appeal to postmodernists wanting not only the deconstruction of the symbolic ideology of colonialism but at the same time the deconstruction of the museum as the authority of our history/histories? Although postmodernist ideology could be argued to be the organizational schema that provides the guiding narrative, the construction of meaning here forms a complex process that merges comprehensive and plural notions of knowledge. This exhibit almost becomes a mediational space that encourages audiences to combine and separate, evaluate and define these different knowledge systems. I am not arguing that this was necessarily the intent of the curator, as his focus was on portraying to visitors his ideas about interpretive frameworks based on the plurality of histories. Yet when Chaat Smith argues that there are alternative “self-told” histories, he automatically also acknowledges that there are metanarratives in the tradition of the comprehensive system of knowledge. As a result, the audience is faced, whether by curatorial intent or not, with the challenging experience of coming to terms with two different ways of looking at the world.

James Clifford proposes that certain processes exist in museums and exhibits within the negotiations between Native Americans and scholars and that “the complex, unfinished colonial entanglements of anthropology and Native communities are being undone and rewoven.”¹⁹ He identifies the key processes involved as the articulations, performances, and translations of identity and argues that these processes are useful “components of an analytic tool kit for understanding old/new indigenous formations.”²⁰ He is focused on uncovering the politics of tradition through an analysis of the history of collaboration in the Arctic; however, his analytical tools (or processes) are not explained in terms of cross-cultural categories or in reference to, as Ruth Phillips points out, the different approaches to knowledge production. Phillips argues that “key aspects of traditional indigenous knowledge are fundamentally incompatible with Western traditions of knowledge production.”²¹ This exchange between Clifford and Phillips is useful in highlighting the need

to find new frameworks to assess the production of knowledge through the confluence of or independently co-existing knowledge systems. With a framework based on genres of expectancy we can ask how people are situating themselves within the public performance of history and how they use particular knowledge systems to validate and authenticate these histories. As I will now address, we need to recognize the manner in which individuals collect these experiences to internalize co-existing layers of meanings and continually engage with the relationships between different knowledge systems.

My third encounter with the NMAI was through the many reviews written about the museum in newspapers. I followed these closely in order to study how the media created meanings from the exhibits at the NMAI. I also asked what assumptions or genres of expectancy are being employed to critique exhibits. A handful of journalists who reviewed the NMAI scripted their articles around their disappointment of the lack of a singular guiding narrative, accusing the museum of being ahistorical. This particular critique originated from assumptions similar to those that I have previously addressed in my discussion on the academic and scientific genre of expectancy of contributions to a singular body of knowledge. For example, Marc Fisher of the *Washington Post* wrote that “the museum fails to give visitors the basic tools needed to ask good skeptical questions. There is not nearly enough fact or narrative to give us the foundation we need to judge the Indians’ version of their story.”²² Paul Richard of the *Washington Post* argued that

what’s missing is the glue of thought that might connect one [object] to another. Instead one tends to see totem poles and T-shirts, headdresses and masks, toys and woven baskets, projectile points and gym shoes, things both new and ancient, beautiful and not, all stirred decoratively together in no important order that the viewer can discern.²³

Thus far, Euro-American scholars have largely constructed their ideas about history and culture, as well as collected data on these subjects, through organizational schemas that are, at least in the imaginations of the general public, vestiges of nineteenth-century beliefs in the idea of comprehensive knowledge. Fisher provides an example of this way of thinking in requesting a unified history in the NMAI for both political and scholarly reasons:

American History is a thrilling and disturbing sway from conflict to consensus and back again. But the contours of the battle between division and coalition are too often lost in the way history is taught today. Now sadly, the Smithsonian, instead of synthesizing our stories, shirks its responsibility to give new generations of Americans the tools with which to ask the questions that could clear a path toward a more perfect union.²⁴

Journalists looking for traditional Euro-American historical chronologies or organizational schemas were disappointed in the exhibits. Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times* argued that the museum privileged multi-vocality and the diversity of viewpoints over an organized investigation of Native American culture and history: "The goal of making that museum answer to the needs, tastes and traditions of perhaps 600 diverse tribes . . . results in so many constituencies that the museum often ends up filtering away detail rather than displaying it."²⁵ Tiffany Jenkins from the *Independent Review* in London looked at the access policies and therefore the role of the museum in contributing to research agendas. She noted how some of the collections are restricted and may only be viewed and or studied by members from the tribe where these objects originate and argued that "what is lost at NMAI is that knowledge and truth does not come from our biology and background. We can all attempt to comprehend our shared pasts through investigation, inquiry and debate, regardless of where we were born and to whom."²⁶ Again, this particular perspective assumes that there are shared truths that can be ascertained through objective frameworks of inquiry and that these truths also come together to form a unifying history of humankind.

The journalists who wrote favorable reviews celebrated the museum's opening as a stance against traditional scientific schemas and in particular, the anthropological frameworks through which Native Americans were viewed:

For five centuries, others have tried to define these people labeled Indians, to categorize them, to put them in some kind of taxonomy, the way scientists describe beetles, birds or bison. Conquistadors had their say, and tobacco planters, and Pilgrims, and Founding Fathers, and missionaries, and Army generals, and finally all the ethnologists and anthropologists who in the 19th century emerged from universities and East Coast museums, taking the measure of

these native people—and perhaps bringing home some masks, pottery and human bones.²⁷

This particular stance taken against anthropology could also be seen to be linked to the perspectives of many Native American curators at the NMAI who encouraged alternative modes to understanding history and culture. As Clifford argues, “‘the anthropologist’—broadly and sometimes stereotypically defined—has become a negative alter ego in contemporary indigenous discourse.”²⁸ In the *Washington Post*, James Pepper Henry, the NMAI deputy assistant director for cultural resources, was cited as saying that the NMAI would not follow conventional anthropological practices as “this is a venue for native peoples to tell their story. You are not going to get the anthropological perspective.”²⁹ Gerald McMaster, a deputy assistant director for the museum, argued that “anthropology as a science is not practiced here. . . . We look to the communities themselves as authorities about who they are.”³⁰ Another reporter stated that museum leaders argued that the NMAI was “a resolute effort to step outside the objectifying habits of anthropology and all the other disciplines with mainstream museum cred.”³¹

A number of journalists also demonstrated how they believed anthropology still relied on antiquated ideas about comprehensive knowledge: “anthropologists roam from the present to the distant past, from the Information Age to the Stone Age. They gobble up data, connect cultural dots, listen to exotic tongues and attempt to push their observations through some kind of scientific filter.”³² Anthropology is seen to have adhered to nineteenth-century ideas about the production and categorization of knowledge and has yet to accept the plurality of knowledges. Phillip Kennicott of the *Washington Post* argued that rather than “simply putting a sunny face on the kind of anthropology represented by Mead” the new museum “is a monument to Postmodernism—to a way of thinking that emphasizes multiple voices and playful forms of truth over the lazy acceptance of received wisdom, authority and scientific ‘certainty.’”³³ These journalists broadened the critique of anthropology beyond colonial politics and the struggles for self-representation and tackled what they saw as the public’s legitimate mistrust of science as an arbitrary form of authoritarianism.

The media’s view of the NMAI shows the two perspectives that are central to my argument about the ways in which dissimilar systems of

knowledge are negotiated in the NMAI. According to the first viewpoint, journalists argued that the museum has failed to provide a systematic treatment of knowledge. In the second, journalists suggested that the NMAI acknowledges the plurality of knowledges and is successful in giving Native Americans a voice. In each perspective, the genre of expectancy to which the journalists ascribes privileges either comprehensive knowledge or the plurality of knowledges as the accepted framework for the creation and interpretation of exhibits.

The apparent bifurcation of these two views, however, belies the nature of the world we live in and how these different ideas play out on the ground. Comprehensive and pluralistic views of knowledge have co-existed for at least half a century, and there are areas of ambiguity where both are used simultaneously and are part of the dynamic construction of meaning. As I have illustrated with my discussion of the Houser and Morrison exhibit, these two approaches are, in areas, a necessary part of understanding the exhibits at the NMAI. The production of new knowledges at the NMAI comes from the co-existence of and conflict between these two approaches. This process also creates irresolvable tensions where both viewpoints are mutually dependent on each other for their interpretation in a public setting. In this particular case, the NMAI's stance against anthropology is valid as long as comprehensive and or scientific knowledge is upheld by others and therefore sustains an ongoing dialogue.

We must note the assumptions made by journalists who portray anthropologists as the purveyors of comprehensive knowledge and Indians as the purveyors of postmodern and pluralist perspectives on knowledge. Anthropology, however, has been a central part of the critique of paradigms that relied on comprehensive knowledge. Similarly, not all Native Americans are arguing for paradigms based on multi-vocal and plural systems of knowledge; some are arguing for Native American voices to be included in the master narratives of history, thus legitimating both grand narratives and the plurality of knowledges. It is also worth clarifying that the journalistic view of the NMAI is not necessarily that of the general public and that much of what was considered in these reviews, such as the positive or negative role of anthropology, is not necessarily central to how members of the public interpret the exhibits at the NMAI.

To conclude, I want to relay a fourth encounter with the NMAI that took place a month after my first two visits and my reading of the newspaper

reviews. I had telephoned my uncle, Rhys Isaac, an historian of colonial America, to hear his views on the new museum. He responded to the museum's location at the right hand shoulder of the Capitol by declaring it as the public announcement of a new order of political representation in Washington: "the museum is concerned with manifesto and is a wonderful declaration" of the principles and objectives of contemporary Native Americans.³⁴ He agreed that the museum openly experiments with alternative ways of telling history and eschews Euro-American categories in favor of new rhetorical modes. It proclaims that "there is not one way of knowing, or one way of telling history and that scientists do not have a monopoly on understanding Native American history and culture."³⁵ Rhys also referred to the "stream of artifacts" in the museum that were designed to be visually and textually fluid in order to develop this new genre for telling history, and as such, these exhibits were "sure to madden the archaeologists and delight the postmodernists."

He and I also discussed the layering of ideologies, and I shared with him my argument about different but mutually dependent knowledge systems. Our conversation raised my awareness of how meaning is not merely co-constructed within and limited to an engagement between curator, visitor, and an exhibit; it also needs to be seen as layers of co-existing meanings. An appropriate analogy would be the sediments of a riverbed that can be seen simultaneously and diachronically when a profile section is cut and analyzed. The history of the river can only be seen either horizontally or vertically, because cutting a profile of one destroys the visibility and translation of the other. From above, however, each layer co-exists and forms a complex undulating landscape, and it is this perspective with which we are most familiar. The underlying layers influence the shape as a whole, and all layers are contrasting, separate, and, at the same time, mutually dependent in shaping the riverbed. The different public meanings that have been produced by visitors to the NMAI are made up of the intersection between numerous knowledge systems, two of which I have highlighted here.

I also want to clarify to my readers that they should not take away from this article the idea that there is an agreed upon and purposeful coherence to the exhibits at the NMAI, thus suggesting that all curators and the museum as a whole worked together to form a specific message about Native American culture and history. While individual curators project specific themes and some of these themes are shared among the

various curators, it is far more interesting to encounter a complex layering of meaning and perspectives in the museum.

Lastly, I want to ask what can we learn from four encounters with one institution. How do we interpret the palimpsest of encounters, each one with its own audience, script, and performance? Once layered, like the riverbed, these form complex landscapes that often bring together contradictory ideologies and beliefs. In her review of current models used to develop exhibits, Phillips also points out that we cannot understand the meanings produced by exhibits only at one point in time but as products of ongoing processes:

Museum exhibits do not work in a moment, and the creators of exhibits usually find out only years later, if ever, about the new perspectives that were suddenly glimpsed by a local visitor, a tourist, or a school child during a visit to an exhibit . . . of the curiosity that was whetted, or of the small epiphanies that were sparked.³⁶

As shown by the varied responses from the media, visitors to the NMAI are exposed to both comprehensive knowledge and plural knowledges in contexts outside of the museum. Yet many people are obviously perplexed by the existence of these different underlying principles within the museum environment itself and are ill-equipped to reach an understanding of the interactive dynamics between these dissimilar systems. Although the interaction between knowledge systems is not discussed openly by museums, we must imagine that we are at the start of the creation of new genres of expectancy where different but co-existing systems are seen as mutually dependent in creating dialogues and meanings. In her exploration of museum models, Phillips asks, "Is the increasing acceptance of the collaborative paradigm . . . evidence that a pluralistic postcolonial ethos has established itself as ideology?"³⁷ I would argue that while the intercultural and collaborative paradigm may be partially accepted within museums, the public is not aware of how these collaborations also adjudicate diverse knowledge systems. Phillips makes the astute comment that museums need to communicate to their audiences the intellectual processes that are involved in producing exhibits. I would take this line of reasoning further by arguing that we need to convey in some way to the public the manner in which different systems of knowledge are negotiated and mediated through institutions such as museums. As I discovered through my four encounters with the NMAI, museum ex-

periences and ideational exchanges help us internalize the engagement of different knowledge systems, which are continually at play in the world around us.

NOTES

This article is very much the direct result of discussions held with colleagues about the NMAI, and I would like to acknowledge here the ideas and contributions made by Amy Lonetree, Joshua Bell, Keith Kintigh, Elizabeth Edwards, and Roger Anyon. I also want to thank my students at Arizona State University, Ramsi Watkins, Kimberley Arth, and William Calvo, all of whom challenged and developed further my theories on knowledge systems. Appreciation for the clarification of the thoughts communicated here must go to Sean Walsh, who untiringly helped me to say what it really is that I want to say.

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