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Disrupting Past Paradigms: The National Museum of the American Indian and the First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

RUTH B. PHILLIPS

THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS of both the United States and Canada marked the new millennium by opening exhibitions that rethink the ways that Native North Americans have been represented for more than a century. The National Museum of the American Indian's (NMAI) new exhibits invite comparison with the First Peoples Hall opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in 2003 both because of their similarities and their differences.¹ On the one hand, their shared features evidence the transnational impact of postcolonial critiques of the museum that began in the 1980s. On the other hand, their differences suggest the ways in which such critiques have been

1. The CMC is located in Gatineau, Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, in Canada's National Capital region. For a review of the CMC's exhibition see Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Salber Phillips, "Double Take: Contesting Time, Place, and Nation in the First Peoples Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (2005): 694–704.

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mediated by local forms of historical consciousness, national museum traditions, and specific kinds of identity politics.

Visiting the two museums, one's first impression is of similarity rather than difference, for the CMC's and the NMAI's buildings were both designed in the signature style of Douglas Cardinal, a Canadian architect of Blackfoot and Metis ancestry. In both Ottawa and Washington, Cardinal's undulating, organic strata and the warmth of his preferred gold-hued stone contrast sharply with the grey historicism of official architecture.² Once inside the buildings, however, fundamental differences of scale and scope are immediately noticeable. The NMAI is a self-standing museum entirely dedicated to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, while the CMC's First Peoples Hall occupies 35,000 square feet on the ground floor of Canada's national museum of history and anthropology. Its exhibits, complemented by the Northwest Coast house fronts and totem poles in the adjacent Grand Hall, focus exclusively on the indigenous peoples of what is now Canada. Such contrasts index the different historic relationships to global empires of the United States and Canada. While Canada's national museum reflects the country's relatively recent colonial status and its ties to the British empire, the NMAI reflects George Heye's comprehensive approach to collecting, which was itself a reflection of the economic power of the United States and its status as the imperial power of the Americas. Yet in the present, the NMAI's erasure of national borders can be understood as a postcolonial reassertion of the organic interconnectedness of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

A closer look at the individual installations in the two museums reveals differences that are less a matter of scope or size and more a product of the different power structures and models of curatorial process that informed their development. When Congress created the NMAI, it delegated authority to a board and a senior administration made up largely of Native Americans who have ensured that power remained unambiguously in indigenous hands. Although non-Native scholars and museum professionals joined the staff and served as consultants, long-standing power relationships were inverted. The creation of a Native American-controlled museum within the Smithsonian followed an already established model. The founding of the National Museum of African Art and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1979 and 1980 had set precedents according to which the needs and demands of minority groups could be met through separately endowed and managed museums.³ Canada's national museum system has no equivalent tradition of separate institutions. Rather, the curatorial model that was put in place for the

2. The CMC opened in 1989. As Lisa Rochon points out in a review of the NMAI's building, Cardinal used the NMAI commission to realize ideas (such as full height circular atrium) that he had originally hoped to incorporate into the CMC. Because other architects carried the project to completion, however, many of the finishing ideas were not Cardinal's. "Douglas Cardinal's Dream," *The Globe and Mail*, 28 September 2004.

3. Like the NMAI, the National Museum of African Art was created by absorbing a pre-existing museum and its collection into the Smithsonian. The Holocaust Museum was established

development of the First Peoples Hall was designed to comply with the 1992 recommendations of the national Task Force on Museums and First Peoples.⁴ These guidelines require that when Aboriginal cultures are being represented, power must be shared through the establishment of partnerships between museums and representatives of First Nations. Accordingly, two staff curators, one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal, chaired the First Peoples Hall curatorial team, and an advisory committee with fifteen Native members from across Canada was given responsibility for defining the exhibition's thematic structure and messages.⁵

In terms of the model of collaborative curatorial work that I have put forward elsewhere, the NMAI is a "community-curated" museum, while the CMC is "multivocal."⁶ While the former addresses visitors in a unified voice that is unmistakably Aboriginal, a number of different voices can be distinguished at the CMC. For example, the negotiation of different professional, intellectual, and cultural formations that took place within the CMC during the process of exhibition development is made part of the exhibition in a self-consciously reflexive section entitled "Ways of Knowing," in which the explanatory force of archaeology, ethnology, and traditional indigenous knowledge are juxtaposed and their equivalent authorities asserted. In a section entitled "An Ancient Bond with the Land," however, the multiple voices become contestatory. Later in the exhibit, however, standard anthropological understandings of traditional Aboriginal subsistence patterns are interrupted by "Contemporary Issues Booths" that present recent and sometimes violent clashes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people over land and resources. I would argue that these different rhetorical modes are not only products of different power relations and models of curatorial practice, but also reflect recent differences in the two national political cultures. For the past four decades, the separatist movement in Quebec has gained in strength, threatening national political disintegration. After 1982, when Aboriginal sovereignty was entrenched in the Canadian constitution, the culture of negotiation to which Canadians have become accustomed was made even more com-

by Congress and opened in 1993, responding to the felt need of American Jews for a public site of Holocaust commemoration. A third Smithsonian museum in the Washington area devoted to minority cultures is the Anacostia Museum and Center for African-American History and Culture.

4. *Turning the Page: The Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples*, was ratified by its commissioners, the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association. It is available from the Canadian Museums Association. See also Trudy Nicks, "Partnerships in Developing Cultural Resources: Lessons from the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples," *Culture* 12, no. 1 (1994): 87–94.

5. There is an organic link between the NMAI and CMC, formed not only by their use of the same architect, but also by the participation in both projects of a number of the same individuals as professional or community curators. For example, Gerald McMaster was co-chair of the First Peoples Hall until he left to become Deputy Director for Cultural Resources at the NMAI.

6. "Collaboration in Exhibitions: Toward a Dialogic Paradigm." In Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 153–170.

plex by the need to consider the historical entitlements not only of the French and English “founding nations,” but also of the First Nations.

Despite these contrasts, a set of common concerns and messages emerge from the two exhibitions. Both give thematic prominence to problems of stereotyping and identity, stressing the diversity of indigenous peoples and the importance of recognizing their cultural distinctiveness in the present, rather than the past. At the NMAI, issues of identity and contemporaneity form the museum’s central messages, while at the CMC identity is linked to land claims in an equally insistent manner. In Canada, unlike the U.S., land claims remain the single most urgent political issue facing Aboriginal people. Vast areas of the country were never formally alienated, and a process of treaty negotiation was resumed in the 1990s. In addition, many First Nations who signed treaties are taking governments to court for noncompliance.

At the NMAI, in contrast, the greatest emotional intensity is evoked not by the political challenges of the present, but by the problem of the past. The First Peoples Hall tells the story of the five hundred years since Columbus through a linear narrative carried by displays of historical objects and explanatory text panels. In the NMAI’s “Our Peoples” exhibit, which addresses the problem of history, no chronological account is attempted. Instead, curator Jolene Rickard has created a site of commemoration and mourning. As visitors enter “Our Peoples,” they pass a frosted glass panel on which the word “EVIDENCE” is etched in a classical font. In a series of long, curving glass cases, the artifacts of indigenous presence and colonial oppression are amassed. The first case is filled with ceramic figurines taken from archaeological sites throughout the Americas. None is individually identified, for their purpose is not to invite aesthetic contemplation or to convey specific historical facts, but rather to evoke in a more general way the populous, pre-Columbian vitality of the Americas. “They aren’t ‘Indians,’” Paul Chaat Smith’s eloquent text panel tells us, “They have never heard of ‘America.’ The figures standing before you knew this world. Many spent centuries underground until farmers, tomb raiders, road builders, and archaeologists brought them to light. Like their human descendants they are survivors of a buried past.” The subsequent cases are filled with similar arrays of objects—accumulations of gold, guns, Bibles, and treaties—artifactual “evidence” that comes not from the hermetically sealed taxonomic spaces of “native cultures,” but from the interspaces of colonial contact. Their impact depends not on their aesthetic singularity but on their cumulative weight. The prototypes of these installations are the haunting cases of shoes, hair, and eyeglasses taken from the victims of Nazi genocide that confront visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a few blocks from the NMAI’s new building.

The NMAI’s permanent installations seek to disrupt both of the modernist paradigms of museum display, art and artifact.⁷ These two modes, which re-

7. On art and artifact paradigms see Robert Redfield, “Art and Icon,” in Robert Goldwater, ed., *Aspects of Primitive Art* (New York: Museum of Primitive Art, 1959); and Susan Vogel, ed.,

main standard for non-Native museums, are linked by their common focus on objects as self-standing loci of human creativity and aesthetic expression or as specimens of human culture. Many contemporary Native North American museologists, however, regard both forms of exhibition as fetishizing and appropriative because they decontextualize and deaden the Aboriginal cultures for which they are made to stand. In the numerous talks NMAI director Richard West, Jr. has given about his museum project during the past decade, he has insisted that the NMAI exhibitions “would not be object-driven.”⁸ Much the same can be said for those installations in the First Peoples Hall that were most closely controlled by the Aboriginal Advisory Committee. Their desire to resist object-centered display was articulated in one of the principles it adopted for the hall: “In developing the exhibits, we are working with ideas. While we recognize and treasure the skill, knowledge and aesthetic quality represented in the objects in the collections, in exhibits the role of objects will be to illustrate ideas. The shape of the collection will not determine or limit the character of exhibits.”⁹ The reviewers of major U.S. newspapers who attended the NMAI opening sharply criticized what they saw as the museum’s failure to highlight its many aesthetically outstanding and rare historical objects and to provide standard historical and ethnographic information for those that were displayed. “The museum owns 800,000 Indian objects. Where are they? Mostly absent,” wrote Paul Richard of *The Washington Post*,¹⁰ while Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times* complained that “one does not learn what daily life is like or even what the tribe’s religious ceremonies consist of.”¹¹

These reviewers missed the point. In their different ways, both the NMAI and the CMC attempt to deconstruct and supersede the histories that visitors already “know.” Both of these exhibits, then, open up a broader question. As Louis Althusser has pointed out, the sponsoring of a new representation by a nation state can only happen if the representation is seen to serve the state’s ideological needs.¹² How, then, are the *new* stories being told in these two national museums aligned with evolving constructs of the nation? What impact can these displays have in the ongoing Native American struggle against the legacy of five centuries of death, loss, and compromised identity? And does

Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Museums (New York: The Centre for African Art, 1988).

8. For example, at his talk at a symposium on “Native Women and Art: Survival and Sovereignty” at Stanford University in May, 2002.

9. “CMC Principles for Development of the First Peoples Hall (Created 1998, edited 2002)”, copy provided the author by Dr. Andrea Laforet, Director of Ethnology and Cultural Studies, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

10. “Shards of Many Untold Stories,” *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2004.

11. “A Museum That Speaks With an American Indian Voice,” *New York Times*, 21 September 2004.

12. For example, “I have suggested that the ideologies were realized in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, in the ISA’s [Ideological State Apparatuses].” Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” from *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 184.

the disruption of conventional rhetorics of display represent a temporary ritual of reversal or a permanent museological revolution? It is too soon to answer these questions, but it will be important to track the public's reception of both exhibitions and the changes that are made as time goes on as a valuable way of understanding larger changes that are at work in the societies that have sponsored them.

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