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Decolonising the museum: the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC

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The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the Smithsonian Institution's new facility on the National Mall in Washington DC, challenges the very notion of what constitutes a museum. Probably the most theoretically informed museum in North America, this is no shrine to the past: it is a museum that claims both past and present to shape a decolonised future for Indigenous populations.

Keywords: USA, museums, decolonisation, indigenous archaeology

The development of national institutions such as museums and art galleries coincided with the emergence of colonialism and imperialism, and consequently such institutions were saturated with notions of racial difference and human classification popular at the time (Foley 2000). Colonialism was inextricably intertwined with the notion of researching exotic lands and their populations and establishing what Said (1978) calls the 'positional superiority' of the colonisers. Each new collection of objects evoked the conceptualisation of a place and a people previously unknown to Europeans. Placed in museums, these objects were '*transformed by their context into something that could be seen both as exotic and as typifying a place or people*' (Fox 1992), their very existence symbolising the ability of Europeans to obtain control over uncharted worlds. This occurred at both the centres and peripheries of colonial worlds. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes:

... research became institutionalised in the colonies, not just through academic disciplines, but through learned and scientific societies and scholarly networks. The transplanting of research institutions, including universities, from the imperial centres of Europe enabled local scientific interests to be organized and embedded in the colonial system. (Smith 1999: 8)

The discourse of colonialism informs the design of museum exhibits in a number of specific ways, and can be identified with three governing concepts: the boundary, the label, and the meta-narrative. The 'boundary' is important because it allows the classification of collections according to time and space as well as the dichotomies essential to colonialism,

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Figure 1. East entrance of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, with the wetlands in the foreground. Photo by Robert C. Lautman.

such as that of ‘self’ and ‘other’. The ‘label’ is important because it demonstrates that the unknown is known, and that the world can be ordered. The ‘meta-narrative’ is important because it establishes the authority of the institution as well as the positional superiority of the colonisers. Taken together, these three concepts shape the exhibits of the colonial museum, normalising the power relations inherent in cultural hegemony. Challenging these concepts is an essential step in the decolonisation of the museum.

The challenges faced by the designers of the National Museum of the American Indian have been great. Located at the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, the over-riding hurdle was that of shaping what is essentially a Western medium (and one which can be interpreted as the epitome of the Western penchant to order and control both past and present), to convey Native history in such a way that it is guided by Native philosophies, but aimed at a primarily non-

Native audience. The touchstone guiding the Museum through these challenges has been its mission statement:

The National Museum of the American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary cultural achievements of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere by advancing, in consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Native people, knowledge and understanding of Native cultures, including art, history, and language, and by recognizing the museum’s special responsibility, through innovative public programming, research, and collections, to protect, support, and enhance the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of Native culture and community.

Director W. Richard West, Jr, a Southern Cheyenne and former Chair of the American Association of Museums, saw the shaping of the NMAI as a choice between a ‘temple’ where interpretations are determined by a disciplinary elite and a ‘forum’ for the sharing of knowledge between Native and non-Native groups (West 2002). Embedded in the concept of forum is the notion of a living heritage as a fundamental reality that must be represented, as the NMAI takes on a special responsibility to protect, support and enhance the development, maintenance and perpetuation of Native culture and community. In pursuing this aim, a

museum was created that was shaped by the voices and worldviews of Native peoples. The installations were underpinned by five principles (West 2002):

Community: our tribes are sovereign nations.

Locality: this is Indian land.

Vitality: we are here now.

Viewpoint: we know the world differently.

Voice: these are our stories.

This scheme of knowledge is given material substance in the manner that objects in the collections are arranged and described. Deriving from Indigenous conceptual readings of the world, the classificatory systems of the NMAI reveal a holistic concern with the relationships between plants, animals, humans and places as well as between past and present. This is contrary to non-Indigenous classification systems, being based on neither the Linnean system of linking similarities of features, nor the tradition of Cutter's system of locating items in place, preferably adjacent to other items which share similar features (see Mathe 1998; Chanda 2001).

Constructed with the conscious aim of transforming relations between Native and non-Native people, the establishment of the NMAI had the potential to transform the organisation of knowledge in a number of ways – by changing the sense of historical memory and, in the case of national museums, the sense of national identity. This meant challenging the authority of existing institutions. Shaped within contemporary postcolonial discourse, the very notion of a National Museum of the American Indian had the potential to allow visitors to rethink the history of Native peoples and, since history is written by victors, to establish the triumph of Native peoples over the adversities of colonialism. Why, then, are some people disappointed, confused or angry?

Creation of the NMAI

The NMAI is the first national museum dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of Native Americans. It was originally established in 1989 with the collections of the former Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York. However, its centrepiece facility, the museum on the National Mall in Washington, DC did not open until 21 September 2004. This \$200 million institution also incorporates a research centre in Suitland, Maryland, where tribal visitors can hold ceremonies as part of a shared stewardship of the objects (see Sides 2004); and the George Gustav Heye Center, located in New York City. Taken together, these facilities hold responsibility for the management and interpretation of the world's largest collection of Native American artefacts.

The celebrations surrounding the opening of the new museum on the Mall attracted extensive national media attention, an important occurrence in a country where the injurious effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples have been over-shadowed by that other travesty of human rights, slavery. The feeling of empowerment that Native Americans felt during these celebrations was almost tangible. More than 17 000 people registered for the Native Nations Procession along the Mall, which started symbolically at the National

Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian institution most clearly impacted by the new NMAI. The expectations of Indigenous peoples were high and the NMAI expected to fulfil them:

Set against the dramatic backdrop of the U.S. Capitol building on the National Mall, the museum's location symbolizes a deeper understanding and reconciliation between America's first citizens and those who have come to make these shores their home. The opening of NMAI on the National Mall marks an unprecedented cultural achievement as Native Americans from North, Central, and South America realize a long-awaited dream to share and honor their vibrant cultures with visitors from throughout the world.
(<http://www.nmai.si.edu/>)

The opening ceremonies were followed by the First Americans Festival, a 6-day celebration that included more than 300 prominent Native American musicians, dancers, and storytellers, representing 30-40 Native communities in North, South and Central America. With an anticipated attendance of more than 600 000 visitors from throughout the world, this festival of 'living arts' provided a unique opportunity for members of the public to experience Native cultures first hand, providing visual confirmation of the NMAI's commitment to reaching across the gap between Native and non-Native peoples in the Americas.



Figure 2. Physical anthropologist and member of the Choctaw nation, Dorothy Lippert, dressed for the Native Nations Procession.

The design of the museum, like the choice of exhibits, emerged from extensive discussions with Native communities and individuals (NMAI 2004). Reminiscent of the adobe architectural style of the American Southwest and with sweeping curves that suggest that the building was fashioned by the elements, the new museum's landscape reminds us that this is the land of Indigenous peoples. This landscape includes more than 33 000 plants of 150 species, a pond with lily pads, a waterfall, tobacco leaves, cornstalks and more than 40 large uncarved rocks and boulders, called Grandfather Rocks, which symbolise the longevity of Native peoples' relationships to their lands. It is situated according to the cardinal directions and the entrance is aligned to the Capitol building, giving material substance to the power relations that exist between the two institutions.

The permanent installations are focused on three themes: *Our Universes*, *Our Lives*, and *Our Peoples*, augmented by an opening art exhibition called *Native Modernism*. The manner in which traditional Indigenous

cosmologies, philosophies and worldviews shape the contemporary world guides the first installation, which has the full title *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World*. Organised around the solar year, this exhibit depicts the lives of Indigenous peoples from throughout the Western Hemisphere as a living heritage inherited from their ancestors. Community galleries explore these issues in depth as they inform the lives of eight individual communities, those of the Pueblo of Santa Clara (Española, NM, USA), Anishinaabe (Hollow Water and Sagkeeng Bands, Manitoba, Canada), Lakota (Pine Ridge Reservation, SD, USA), Quechua (Comunidad de Phaqaqchanta, Cusco, Peru), Hupa (Hoopa Valley, CA, USA), Q'eq'chi' Maya (Cobán, Guatemala), Mapuche (Temuco, Chile), and Yup'ik (Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, AK, USA). Each community gallery showcases the cultural philosophies that guide that community, and is designed to reflect that community's particular cosmology. Many of these accounts are not chronological, which contrasts with traditional museum formats but is consistent with the characteristics of Native histories (see Rappaport 1998: 11). The installation also highlights several seasonal events: the North American Indigenous Games, the annual Powwow held in Denver, Colorado, and the Christian/Indigenous Day of the Dead festivities of Mesoamerica.

The last five centuries of Native history are told directly through Native American voices in the installation entitled *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*. As they tell their own histories, these people not only offer new insights into their cultures but also challenge the stereotypes that would have them depicted as unchanging. This exhibit concentrates on the strategies used by Native peoples in their struggles for survival when confronted by the impact of new diseases and weapons, a weakening of traditional spirituality, and a seizure of lands by colonising governments.

Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities discloses the layers of Indigenous identity in a contemporary world. It focuses on the lives of eight Native communities: the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians (CA, USA), the urban Indian community of Chicago (IL, USA), Yakama Nation (WA, USA), Igloodik (Nunavut, Canada), Kahnawake (Quebec, Canada), Saint-Laurent Metis (Manitoba, Canada), Kalinago (Carib Territory, Dominica), and the Pamunkey Tribe (VA, USA). Consistent with Indigenous ways of teaching (see Nez Denetdale 2004: 138) the stories are personalised through being presented by community members. Individually and together, they highlight the strategies that Native people employed in order to survive the on-going impact of colonisation, maintain cultural integrity and preserve traditional languages and arts. The diversity of these Native displays is but a reflection of the diversity of Native communities.

The NMAI collections derive from Indigenous groups that span the Western Hemisphere, from the Yupik of Alaska to the Tapirape of Brazil. The objects range from stone tools, masks and baseball caps to bibles, guns and jewellery. While the NMAI has some 8 000 000 objects to draw upon, as in other museums only around 1 per cent of these can be on display. How to choose the objects to be included in the 1 per cent? With more than 30 per cent of the collection coming from Central and South America, the NMAI has a responsibility to substantively and sensitively represent the depth and diversity of these regions as well as that of North America. Integrating objects from Indigenous cultures in North, Central and South America into overall narratives of Indigenous histories and the impact of colonisation takes away from the divides created by contemporary political borders, focussing attention



Figure 3. *Depicting the cultural diversity of Indigenous Peoples.*

on the enduring, though changing, relations between these Indigenous groups throughout the Western Hemisphere, without the restrictions of modern day boundaries. This diversity is perhaps clearest in the opening installation of masks and figurines from throughout the Western hemisphere (Figure 3), a stunning and elegant crystallisation of the multiplicity of Native cultures before contact with Europeans.

The visual message is of cultural diversity, reinforced by not having the masks labelled or individually provenanced. By failing to provide easy resolution in the forms of labels and provenance, the mind is directed towards consideration of the links between the objects. Thinking on this installation, for the first time I seriously tried to imagine the cultural diversity of the Western Hemisphere, as it existed before contact.

The installations also challenge the conventions that inform the display of Indigenous cultures. The usual design of Indigenous exhibits is shaped by an assumed division between 'art' and 'science', between aesthetic experiences and the study of ethnographic objects. As Price (1989: 87) points out, in ethnographic exhibits *'aesthetic experiences and beauty are not joined with ethnographic evidence and social curiosity, but opposed to them'*. In contrast, the installations at the NMAI are exquisite, more akin to those of an art gallery than to traditional ethnographic spaces. Rather than cram objects and their individual labels into congested ethnographic displays, the NMAI carefully arranges the pieces to provide the visitor with an aesthetically pleasing – and memorable – experience. Freed from an over-arching curatorial



Figure 4. Dissolving the divide between ethnographic object and art.

voice and the distracting labelling of individual objects, the exhibits convey the ‘big picture’ whilst admitting the possibility of multivalent interpretations. For example, the display of gold objects (Figure 4) not only tells of colonial greed and the emergence of global economies, but also incorporates corncobs as a reminder of traditional forms of wealth in the Western Hemisphere. Released from clutter, these objects move beyond their traditional roles as icons of cultural difference to engender multi-layered interpretations of Indigenous cultures, and a new identity as fine art.

This approach to ethnographic display is part of an emerging trend within museology that challenges a strict boundary between art and science, itself ironically an echo of colonial approaches established in regions with small populations during periods of limited funding (e.g. the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart, Australia or the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada). A re-conceptualisation of the Western division between art and science is also apparent in the Musée Dapper, Paris, a museum akin to the NMAI in many critical respects:

Breaking with the tradition of Trocadero and Tervuren, it introduced contemporary gallery aesthetics and presentation strategies into the exhibition of African art. Instead of crowding multiple objects into a single case as anthropological artifacts, grouped according to ethnic and ‘tribal’ origin, the Dapper respectfully showcased each piece.

This approach takes advantage of the best aspects of museum and gallery environments. While this absence of anthropological texts might have been a source of concern to Africanist scholars, it enhanced the streamlined aesthetic effect that is integral to the Dapper's style. (Jules-Rosette 2002)

The seamless join between archaeology and art is emphasised by the inaugural art exhibition of the new facility, *Native Modernism*, which explores the works of George Morrison and Allan Houser, prominent and innovative Native American artists who worked from the mid-1930s to the late 1990s. The museum's over-arching theme of reclaiming the past is perhaps most evident in Morrison's 'Red Totem 1'. Reminiscent of the carved poles of the Northwest, called totem poles by early anthropologists, the Red Totem series reclaims the word 'totem' for the Chippewa people, for whom it means 'family mark'. Taken together, these exhibits highlight the complexity and distinction of Native fine arts – a long way from their traditional relegation to the category of 'Native arts and crafts'.

Critiques

Using Indigenous classification systems in the presentation of Native histories presents significant difficulties, the most critical of which is that people from outside the cultures concerned may not be able to read the exhibits adequately. Given the diversity of Native cultures, this can apply to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers. For a journalist, who has to cover a wide range of topics in which they are not always expert and writing against deadlines, this can be downright frustrating, as is evident in the following quotations from a review by *Washington Post* journalist Paul Richard:

On the third floor, finally, there are some Indian things to see – a gangiluk (a 19th-century Aleutian hunting hat made of wood and walrus whiskers), a Victorian pincushion and moccasins. All of these have beads on them. One can see no other reason why they're side by side.

Indians do beadwork, that's the point. They also chipped at rocks, and for this reason we are shown scores, or perhaps hundreds, of arrowheads and spear points, all swirled into a pattern as if they had just joined a school of fish. Who precisely made them? How old are they? From where do they come? By now one understands – because answers aren't provided – that one is not supposed to ask.

Eight thousand varied objects, some spectacular, are offered to the eye. What's missing is the glue of thought that might connect one 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. (Richard 2004)

Some of the exhibits criticised by Richard are shaped by the postmodern notion of 'open storage' while others are fashioned according to Indigenous, rather than Western, systems of classification, in the process taking Indigenous experiences from the colonial periphery to the centre. These latter exhibits are based on different assumptions and have different systems

of organisation to those encountered in most museums. For example, some Indigenous tribes in South America have a classification system for trees that identifies many species that science does not, and appears to overlook species that science recognizes (Knowledge, Imagery, Vision and Understanding (KIVU) 2004). Indigenous peoples think more in terms of relationships and linkages than partitions (Smith & Burke 2004; see also Zimmerman 1995; Kluth & Munnell 1997; Rappaport 1998).

The power, knowledge and authority of the NMAI is asserted through challenging the conventions that underlie most museum installations, and the combination of Indigenous systems of classification, minimal labelling and the absence of meta-narrative can cause confusion for visitors. Marc Fisher, of the *Washington Post* comments:

The narrator asks visitors to 'view what's offered with respect, but also with skepticism.' That's the right spirit, but the museum fails to give visitors the basic tools needed to ask good, skeptical questions. There's not nearly enough fact or narrative to give us the foundation we need to judge the Indians' version of their story. (Fisher 2004)

The NMAI's conscious sharing of authority with its Indigenous constituency has produced exhibits that have a different shape and content to those of conventional museums. This can be troubling for some viewers, who become unsure of why they are seeing what they are seeing. This is evident in the following review by Andrew Ferguson for the *Bloomberg News*:

Almost all the exhibits have been designed by native peoples themselves, with a minimum of curatorial oversight, and it shows.

Thus in the middle of one space sits a 1950s Bombardier snow bus, used by Metis Indians for snow-fishing. Another display shows a front door taken from an Indian community center in downtown Chicago. One entire case is devoted to an annual Indian singing and dance competition – held in Denver every spring since 1973. The 'artifacts' here are a stack of bumper stickers, a plastic cup from a concession stand, and a jean jacket stamped 'Denver March Pow Wow 2004'. (Ferguson 2004)

And for some, the diversity, and even the multivocality implied by the establishment of a National Museum of the American Indian, is disturbing. Marc Fisher, for example, laments what he describes as '*the balkanization of a society that seems ever more ashamed of the unity and purpose that sustained it over two centuries*', and yearns for a synthesising history that would create social unity:

The Holocaust Memorial Museum started us down this troubling path. Its location there [near the National Mall] opened the gate for the deconstruction of American history into ethnically separate stories told in separate buildings. Museums of black and Hispanic history are in the works . . . 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. (Fisher 2004)

By contrast, a serious criticism of the museum for both Native and non-Native people with a political agenda for change, is that it does not sufficiently take up the task of

unmasking the histories of colonialism (see Lebovics 2004). Many people, especially young Native Americans, would have the museum take a more overtly political role. No doubt, this is related to the current conservative political climate of the United States, since a large part of the Museum's funding comes directly from Congress.

An overarching mandate was to use Native voices to tell their stories. But which stories are to be told? This was another challenge for the new museum. With more than 600 tribes to draw upon in North America alone, it was inevitable that there would have to be compromise not only in terms of whose stories were told but also in terms of the depth that could be presented. The solution adopted by the museum has two prongs: the diversity of cultures is evoked in exhibits in which artefacts were not provenanced to individual tribes. Depth is provided in the eight community exhibits that exist in each of the *Our Universes* and *Our Lives* installations. While it was perhaps inevitable that some communities would be concerned that they were insufficiently represented, the community installations were designed with the notion that the communities represented will change through time, slowly increasing both the diversity and depth of the NMAI's exhibits.

Counter-critique

In a Western, literary way of viewing the world, museology as a discipline has traditionally sought, and found, discontinuity and boundedness, classifying 'like' with 'like' and opposing this to 'difference' (see Wobst 2005). As a result, the classification systems that inform museum installations normally seek and identify firm boundaries in time and space (e.g. Chanda 2001), failing to draw upon the more complex and nuanced systems of Indigenous peoples. This occurs not only at the level of object identification and labelling but also in the ways that curators design installations and present their interpretations. There *is* order in these displays, but it is not the kind of order – or the kind of 'glue of thought' – that museum visitors have learned to expect. Objects are not displayed in chronological sequences or geographical groupings, with neat labels that allow the visitor to provenance each object. Sometimes, as with the opening display of masks and figurines (see Figure 3), this is because the exhibit is presenting cultural diversity, and provenancing each object would divert attention from this wider story. At another level, it may be because the Museum wants its visitors to move beyond the simple resolutions that come with labels. Certainly, people have to work at understanding the exhibits – and perhaps this is the point. They have been given the power to determine what is important for themselves, and this will vary according to each individual, each having their own interpretation. This is an Indigenous, not a Western, route to achieving knowledge. Describing his visit to the museum, a non-Native man with his young son told museum staff:

At first we did not understand the order of the museum and we were having a bad time. Then we realized the museum is like a walk in the woods and then it all made sense. You can choose where you want to go and what you want to learn. (C. Rapkivian, email communication, 7 January 2005)

Fisher's concern derives not only from his inability to understand the system of arrangement being presented but also from the absence of a meta-narrative that provides

clear directions on how to interpret the material on display. Questions of power differences and differentials are integral to the meta-vocabularies normally used in cross-cultural communication (Morphy 2002), and the absence of this in the NMAI's exhibits derives from its role as forum rather than temple. The assertion of Indigenous authority imbues every aspect of the displays and the NMAI refuses to undermine this by providing an authoritative curatorial voice against which to assess the validity of Native peoples' voices. Instead of dictating the story that will be told, the NMAI has guided communities in the presentation of their own visions. Visitors such as Fisher who are looking for the 'dispassionate', scientific curatorial voice that dominates and directs the story will be disconcerted.

The museum visitor trained to seek a label for an authoritative explanation of the meaning of an object will also encounter disappointment, and for the same reason. Developed out of the traditions of natural science and Social Darwinism, object-labels categorise cultures into the neat 'boxes' essential not only to Western discourse but also to the colonial process itself. Ostensibly informative, the underlying purpose of labels is to provide secure resolution to the visitor and to confirm the authority of the institution. However, the information contained on labels in museums is usually sparse and often is limited to European, technical descriptors (see, for example, Hemming 2002). Apparently innocuous descriptive labels can be full of significant resonances, in the case of Indigenous cultures often carrying implicit messages of cultural hegemony and racial hierarchy. Based on the Western assumption of a right to knowledge, rather than the Indigenous notion that knowledge has to be earned, labels are a way of demonstrating that the unknown is known, that the untamed is tamed and that we live in a world that can be controlled through order.

In his comment above, Ferguson fails to recognise that Native people have expert knowledge in their own cultures, and that the role of curator may be one of helping a community to realise its vision, rather than that of imposing a narrative upon that community. Ferguson's confusion is compounded by his conceptualisation of archaeology as a discipline that deals solely with ancient artefacts and does not include objects of modern material culture, a distinction that was abandoned by archaeologists during the early 1980s (e.g. Gould & Schiffer 1981). The NMAI takes a more modern view. While Heye's collection constitutes the core of the installations, it is augmented with a wide range of objects, many donated by Native American tribes. The eclectic juxtaposition of ancient and modern objects is a conscious strategy that asserts that Indigenous peoples have a living heritage and which prevents them from having their authenticity confined to a static past. These exhibits say, 'Our cultures are in a constant state of becoming. Our cultures are being shaped today and our authenticity will not be assessed in terms of a pristine and unchanging Indigenous past. We are still here and we are still evolving.' In this sense, these exhibits express the ongoing shaping of Native identities.

In deciding not to provide a foundation of 'fact' against which to judge the authority of Native peoples' voices in the displays, the NMAI (knowingly, I am certain) left itself open to the accusation of being 'unscholarly' (e.g. Noah 2004; Rothstein 2004). This accusation is both unfair and ill-informed. There are two, not necessarily exclusive, explanations for the NMAI's interpretative strategy. The first is that an executive decision to tell Indigenous stories through Indigenous eyes produced a museum that concurs elegantly with postcolonial theory, since the postcolonial position itself is shaped by Indigenous critiques. The second is

that curators engaged consciously with decolonisation theory in the shaping of their exhibits, that every curatorial decision was considered deeply, and that no practice was adopted simply because this was the usual way of doing it. Irrespective of the route, or intersection of routes, the outcome is a museum that is profoundly scholarly, but with ideas that are not always easily accessed by the general public or, for that matter, traditional anthropologists. This leaves the Museum open to a more valid criticism, of elitism, and this is one that does need to be addressed.

In a postcolonial world, Fisher's view on the 'balkanisation' of culture is unrealistic. Such views are based on an unquestioning acceptance that it is normal for the dominant society to portray its own past but such display is radical for minority groups, such as Indigenous peoples. The kind of synthesis Fisher desires is – and always was – unreal, produced by a cultural hegemony that keeps minority groups, and minority voices, in their place. The cultural unity for which he longs is actually cultural repression. For Indigenous populations from the Western hemisphere, this repression is being redressed by the National Museum of the American Indian.

Conclusion

Museums have the potential to be sites of 'fierce struggle and impassioned debate' often centred around questions of who constitutes the community and who exercises the power to define its identity (Duncan 1995). For postcolonial museums, this process involves the unmasking and inversion of power relations. Wobst (2001) refers to artefacts as '*intentions to change something from what it was to what it should be, or as intentions to prevent change that may take place in the absence of such artefacts*'. He argues that the term material 'intervention' emphasises that artefacts are placed into contexts that humans want to change (or that humans expect will change in undesirable directions if they do not enter artefacts into the situation). From this viewpoint, it is possible to read the NMAI's displays as a chronology of survival: starting with the pre-contact cultural diversity represented in the opening display of masks, moving to the displays of gold jewellery and artwork which highlight the greed that drove the colonial enterprise, past the spears, guns and disease that was inherent in frontier conflict, to the bibles that symbolise the colonisation of Indigenous people's minds and ending with the community installations that celebrate the living heritage of contemporary Native peoples.

The empowerment of new voices can involve a diminution of the authority of established voices. By widening the concept of authority to include the voices of Indigenous peoples, many of whom feel they have been silenced for too long (see Deloria 1988, 1992; Zimmerman 1995; Watkins 2000; Shepherd 2002; Isaacson 2003), the NMAI, either intentionally or inadvertently, challenges the position of non-Indigenous peoples as authorities on Indigenous cultures. This most clearly impacts upon the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), which has extensive collections of Native American artefacts and human remains, and which often is portrayed as being in conflict with Native peoples, even in its own publications (e.g. Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History 2004).

This process is grounded in the rights of Indigenous peoples to control their cultural and intellectual property, a question of current interest in international forums (see Blakeney 1999; Janke 1999, 2003; Nicholas & Bannister 2004), archaeological ethics (e.g. Zimmerman *et al.* 2003; Meskell & Pels 2005) and issues relating to the decolonisation of archaeology generally (see Shepherd 2002; McNiven & Russell in press; Smith & Wobst 2005; Nicholas & Andrews 1997). Through widening the concept of authority to recognise the voices of Native peoples and communities, the NMAI has met the challenge to invert the power relations established by colonialism. As posed by Clifford, this process is that of moving from exclusion to inclusion:

Until museums do more than consult (often after the curatorial vision is firmly in place), until they bring a wider range of historical experiences and political agendas into the actual planning of exhibits and the control of museums collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension. (Clifford 1997: 448)

Moreover, the NMAI has avoided the danger of presenting the history of colonialism as one of victors and victims, in the process perpetrating the disempowerment of Native peoples. Rather, the Museum has chosen to look towards the future, emphasising Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor's notion of 'survance' over the 'wrongs of the past':

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

We have survived and, from a cultural standpoint, triumphed against great odds. We are here now – 40 000 000 indigenous people throughout the Americas and in hundreds of different cultural communities. And we will insist, as we must, that we remain a part of the cultural future of the Americas, just as we were a part of its past and fought so hard to be a part of its present. (West 2004)

In terms of the vocabulary of colonialism outlined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 52-3), the NMAI has moved Indigenous cultures from the margin to the centre. Perhaps the greatest challenge has been that of using Native philosophies and worldviews to shape what is essentially a Western medium for a primarily non-Native audience. Developed on the assumption that Native peoples are the only people able to speak about their heritage values or to convey their ideas on the issues that are significant to them, the NMAI is meeting this challenge, but needs to convey more clearly the philosophy underlying its interpretative strategy. The challenge now is to make more accessible the Indigenous philosophies that have shaped the differences embodied in the NMAI. Even a pamphlet containing a statement of intent would be helpful. The scholarly disciplines normally drawn upon to understand cultural differences include art, history, anthropology and archaeology, but the traditional manifestations of these disciplines have been rejected by the NMAI as tools to be used in

presenting Native cultures, so will be of little assistance in understanding the exhibits. Given the departure from traditional museum practices, more guidance is needed to help the visitor successfully navigate these newly charted Indigenous territories. The task now becomes that of providing that guidance in such a way that it does not undercut the Indigenous shaping of the institution.

As a National Museum charting new territory, the NMAI is leading a nation down a path of understanding and reconciliation. Museums shape our sense of historical memory, and national museums shape our sense of national identity. A cultural and spiritual emblem on the National Mall of Washington, DC, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian exemplifies decolonisation in practice. Through being consciously shaped by the classification systems, worldviews and philosophies of its Indigenous constituency, this new national museum is claiming moral territory for Indigenous peoples, in the process reversing the impact of colonialism and asserting the unique place of Native peoples in the past, present and future of the Americas.

Note. Following the increasing practice of Indigenous authors concerned with decolonisation I capitalise the term 'Indigenous', emphasising the sovereignty of Indigenous groups (see Craven 1996; Smith 1999: 114-5).

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