

Native Empowerment, the New Museology, and the National Museum of the American Indian

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Abstract

The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC — the first national museum devoted solely to the presentation and support of the indigenous cultures of the Americas — opened its doors to the public on 21 September 2004. This paper reviews the first, second, and third waves of critical response to the museum, in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the New Museology in an indigenous museum context. Two distinct tales emerge from these critical responses: one of Native empowerment, and one that centers on the museum's display practices that are informed by the New Museology. These seemingly distinct tales are, in fact, tightly intertwined due to the impossibility of contradiction-free museum praxis when dealing with indigenous materials, as the case of the NMAI makes clear. I argue that embracing such contradictions could point to the next step in advancing indigenous-based museum practice, and in radicalizing museology in general.

Key words: New Museology, National Museum of the American Indian, postcolonialism, indigeneity, museum studies, object collections

'On 21 September 2004,...' — these words introduce numerous popular and academic responses to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). While supposedly straightforward, the significance of the date, which marks the official opening of the NMAI on the Washington (DC) Mall, is in fact quite difficult to ascribe. The date's meaning depends on the kind of history one constructs around the NMAI, and the placement of the NMAI — beginning, middle, or end — within that historical narrative. As NMAI curator Paul Chaat Smith states, 'all histories have a history themselves' (McMaster and Trafzer 2004: 176). This article attempts to make sense of the various histories constructed around the NMAI in what scholar Amy Lonetree has identified as the first, second, and third waves of response to the museum (Lonetree 2006a: 57-8).

The building of the NMAI paralleled the development of what became known academically as the New Museology. Highly diverse, New Museology praxis and theory tend to share a rejection of the top-down power structures historically found within museums. As summarized by Michael Ames in the early 1990s, museum galleries increasingly found themselves playing out two distinct elements emerging in the larger public square: the inclination to publicly question institutional cultural authority, and the increasing recognition of social pluralism (Ames 1992). Ames pinpointed poststructuralist thought as undergirding this larger cultural turn, and as poststructuralist museum critiques flourished in academic thought, they provided the basis for new and experimental museum techniques that ranged from multi-learner technologies to community collaborations.

Because of its national scale, the NMAI's 2004 opening thus represented the largest test case for the New Museology to date in the US. Critical response to the NMAI serves as one measure of how well the New Museology can meet the goals and needs of an institution dedicated to indigenous-based museum practice. The waves of response produce two lenses through which to view the NMAI. The first sees the NMAI as a project of Native empowerment, or as one that fails in the attempt. The building and its layers of interpretation become the site on which these empowerment debates are usually measured and made concrete. The second lens presented by the critical responses can be read not as responses to the NMAI itself, but

to the museum's practices. Because NMAI staff had consciously adopted New Museology praxis, redubbing it the 'new Indian museology' or 'Indigenous museology', critics evaluated the NMAI's success or failure in relation to the New Museology's attitudes toward objects or, as some critics would argue, its absence of objects. As revealed through a study of the Evidence portion of the NMAI's permanent 'Our Peoples' gallery — a portion of the NMAI's exhibitions that appears in nearly all responses — objects are in fact at the core of the NMAI in profoundly contradictory ways.

How can we historically account for such different narrative lenses surrounding the NMAI project? And how does the NMAI situate itself among what can be radically different understandings of the institution's project and mission? I contend that sorting through these debates helps us account for the limits and gains of New Museology in indigenous spaces of museological display. Such accounting is necessary for the continued development and shaping of indigenous-based museum practices.

A Tale of Native Empowerment

In 1990, the NMAI framed its mission in the following adopted policy statement:

The mission of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian is to affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the Western Hemisphere by advancing, in consultations, collaboration and cooperation with them, a knowledge and understanding of their 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. (Evelyn 2006: 51)

W. Richard West, Jr., the founding director of the museum from the project's legal inception in 1989 until his retirement in 2007, often used discourse drawn from this mission statement. West's vision for the NMAI's scholarship and inclusion of Native voices were touted long before any of the project's three sites — the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, and the National Museum of the American Indian on the Washington Mall — were opened (West 1993). While 'celebrate' replaced the policy's vague 'affirm' and 'enhance' in West's public and written statements, 'protect' and 'support' became constant buzz words, often offered in direct opposition to 'study, classify, objectify' (Cobb 2005: 489; West 1993). The difference between these two sets of verbs, and the NMAI's attempt to fully embody the former ('protect' and 'support') while operating within the latter's western form of the museum (associated with 'study, classify, objectify') invited a new phrase for the work of the NMAI: 'the museum different.' Depending on the context, 'the museum different' was connected with a range of practices. For NMAI consultant Elaine Gurian, numerous self-publications of the NMAI, and the majority of museum responses, 'the museum different' was the method of interviewing the museum's Native constituency and incorporating community curators and voices into final exhibitions. For West, 'the museum different' could be connected with a range of practices, from scholarship agendas to the NMAI's 'fourth museum' — the institutionalized structures that connected the museum with Native communities — in support of the museum's stated mission of the 'development, maintenance and perpetuation of Native culture and community'.

'The museum different' takes physical manifestation in the architecture and design of the NMAI's Washington Mall building. The beginning of the process, in the NMAI's self-published literature, is described as a Native elder gathering that sited the building on its present location through ceremonial prayer and discussion rather than through mechanized techniques (Blue Spruce and Thrasher 2008: 1-2). A red stone in the floor of the building's Potomac Hall marks this spot chosen by the elders (Figure 1). The stone, literally and symbolically, marks this spot of elder designation as the center of the physical site — and the center, figuratively, of the NMAI's activity. To carry through this symbolic linkage, this spot then became the center of the design plan. The rotunda dome marks this spot in its 'X' over its glass, that then can

be seen on the top of the building itself. From this center point, a directional radial (E-N-W-S) is marked out by four stones at the site's borders. Originally scheduled to be procured from the continental US, stones were instead brought in through the efforts of each stone's local indigenous group(s), from points furthest north, west, and south of the Western hemisphere. The 'east' marker came from Maryland's Monacan peoples, an indigenous group considered to be one of the museum's host tribes.



*Figure 1. The inlaid red stone in the floor of the Potomac Hall.
Photo courtesy of Paul Chaat Smith.*

The concept of 'host tribes' is critical in the NMAI's self-published literature about its building and landscapes (Blue Spruce 2004: 45; Blue Spruce and Thrasher 2008: 1-2). While the NMAI was established by public law and its land granted on the Washington Mall through national statutes, and while its building and design plans had to be approved by more than one federal agency, the NMAI describes its building site as that of the land of its host tribes. These host tribes form the basis for much of the language used within the building, as well as the landscape, which was designed to 'honor the host tribes on whose land the museum was being built' by recreating the natural landscapes that would have existed before 1492 contact (Blue Spruce and Thrasher 2008: 14).

Thus, Native agency and identity appear to be at the core of the NMAI project. The NMAI narrates its own creation solely in terms of the Native-directed and informed processes that built the institution, as symbolized by the physical processes that shaped the Washington Mall building. A number of reviewers agree. For Fath Davis Ruffins, the NMAI stands as a long-awaited act of cultural sovereignty, the pinnacle of the ethnic museum and folklife movements that accompanied the Civil Rights and Red Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ruffins 1997: 79; also Jacknis 2006, Kerr 2004). In this narrative, the NMAI becomes the 'granddaddy tribal museum,' and its 'fourth museum' is one particularly created to prop up the more than two hundred local tribal museums throughout the US, many of which struggle to remain open (Jacknis 2006: 534). NMAI language and project intentions support this view. Curators Paul

Chaat Smith and Kathleen Ash-Milby, in a 2009 session of the College Art Association annual meeting, discussed their upcoming show on artist Brian Jungen [Dunne-za First Nations, Swiss-Canadian] as one mounted despite the legal definitions of 'American Indian' imposed on the museum by the US government ('Indigeneity' 2009). The planners' insistence on NMAI coverage of the entire western hemisphere was a push against US legal definitions, and a way to recognize tribal affinities over and above the boundaries of contemporary nation-states. As scholar Amanda Cobb asserts, the NMAI stands as a significant 'practice of cultural sovereignty' (Cobb 2005: 502).



Figure 2. Wall of gold, Our Peoples gallery. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Will Greene.

Sovereignty, however, leads to a different kind of narrative: a legal one. As lawyer Whitney Kerr (2004) points out, a platform of US law toward Native nations since the early 1800s has been the recognition that US tribes have inherent national sovereignty, granting them negotiation and treaty-making abilities. Particularly important is the 1831 decision of *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*, in which sovereignty was supported but limited: Indian nations were 'dependent' rather than 'foreign' bodies. This stance fell back on the 'trustee concept,' built on the political discourse of Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau, that posited so-called 'noble savages' as incapable of self-governance and requiring the 'civilized' European conquerors to serve as 'trustees' for indigenous resources. Thus, US law has historically been used to prescribe sovereignty limits, or to designate the trustees who can make such prescriptions — but the law has never taken away sovereignty itself. Cobb's assertion that the NMAI stands as a 'practice of cultural sovereignty' reads the NMAI as a kind of 'arrival' of Native Americans as fully participating and equal players, as they have increasingly exercised greater sovereignty over time. In opposition, critics like Kerr read the NMAI as another form of government limitation that disguises inherent indigenous sovereignty by passing all Native messages through a government-sponsored filter (Kerr 2004: 422-3). While the NMAI was built in the era of American Indian self-determination, ushered in under Richard Nixon in 1970 under pressures of the Civil Rights movement, there still remain strong legal limits to what that self-determination looks like, effectively retaining the power imbalance adopted under *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*.

From this latter perspective, the NMAI building design can be re-read as the outcome of 'the processes by which colonial subjects internalize their own subjugation', as in fact a number of Native scholars have done (Hilden and Huhndorf 1999; also Atalay 2006, Carpio 2006, Lonetree 2006a, 2006b). In this view, the dome becomes an architectural accommodation, necessary to fulfill the design mandates issued by the National Capital Planning Commission and the US Commission of Fine Arts, rather than an inherently Native concept. The range of the Americas that NMAI curators and West discuss as resistance to legal definitions imposed by the US government, instead mimic the colonial reach and presumptuousness of the United States itself (Lonetree 2006a; Phillips 2006). The Native staff intentionally employed in both the Heye Center and the NMAI as part of an effort to connect visitors daily with Native people become

living exhibitions in the persons of the tour guides (called 'cultural interpreters') and of those Native people hired to sit in a 'talking Circle' located at midpoint in the exhibits, ready to answer tourist questions — and, in keeping with long tradition, to embody authenticity, to 'be a real Indian' for museum visitors. (Hilden and Huhndorf 1999: 165)

In these reviews, the promotion of Native artists on a world stage, such as the Venice Biennale projects headed by Paul Chaat Smith and Kathleen Ash-Milby, then become the 'arts' paradigm of colonial museum discourse (Hilden and Huhndorf 1999: 168-75). And the NMAI as a whole stands in as the 'excuse' on Capitol Hill that allows funds to 'mysteriously' disappear from Native American projects at other Smithsonian museums.

The beginning of this negative tale of Native empowerment is government legislation HR 2668. Couched in legal language, HR 2668 acted as a filter that removed Native historical presence and continuation from the NMAI's establishment while it instead turned the foundational project discussions toward the logistics of objects ('Establishment' 1989). Later critics could then accuse the NMAI of watering down or even censoring altogether the history of colonialism (Atalay 2006; Conn 2006). In contrast, the positive Native empowerment narrative posits the NMAI as a capstone to larger eras of struggle. At its most extreme, this capstone narrative leads some reviewers to see the museum as the end project of centuries of conflict between the US and Native peoples, with the NMAI as a symbol of 'conflict resolution' (Fixico 2006: 81).

A Tale of (Missing) Objects

Another origin tale of the NMAI, however, has a much more complex and drawn out history, in which government involvement makes a rather late appearance. Indirectly, nearly all reviews focus on the NMAI's objects, as nearly all, for good or bad, focus on the NMAI displays, rather than on the NMAI building, gardens, café, programming, or even discourse. The most mentioned exhibition component throughout NMAI reviews is a particular set of 'spines,' as they are referred to, that center the permanent 'Our Peoples' exhibition. These spines are curvilinear walls that sit in the center of the gallery space, with community-curated alcoves along the surrounding walls. The spines contain three sets of objects, in fluid design patterns, that represent the 'evidence' of colonial contact: gold, guns, and Bibles (Figures 2-4). The objects are arranged neither as art objects, nor as typologies, but are grouped according to theme with virtually no object explanatory text, other than statements written on the plexiglass casings that describe broad display themes such as 'power' and 'wealth' (Rickard 2007).

Richard West describes the overall approach to objects and curation at the NMAI as a 'cubist approach' (later termed an 'Impressionist approach'): multiple perspectives must systematically be incorporated to portray Native life (West 1993: 6; Cobb 2005: 504). In addition, such perspectives must include Native voices. As Douglas Evelyn, the NMAI's deputy director from 1991 until 2005, put it, 'the NMAI's exhibitions will typically privilege people and ideas over "things"' (Evelyn and Hirsch 2006: 87). Stories have pride of place in the exhibition halls (Berry 2006: 66-7). Decisions were also made early in the NMAI's process that no single academic discipline would govern the more than seven thousand on-display objects' care and presentation (Cobb 2005: 494; also Smith 2005). Within this framework, as guest curator and designer of the 'Our Peoples' spines, Jolene Rickard saw herself

as making an intervention on the framing of Native cultures within a metanarrative of the West.... I proceeded to look for an opportunity in the collection to recapture Indigenous history with the very objects that represented our capture. (Rickard 2007: 88)

For Rickard, the spines, with their refusal of 'art/artifact' discourse and display, typological or chronological arrangements, or standard textual explanations, stood as 'interventions' or 'counter-narratives' against the western discourse that has predominated museum settings. Art historian Ruth Phillips uses similar language in her reviews of the NMAI, calling the exhibition strategy of 'counter-installations' by Rickard 'a key postcolonial strategy' (Phillips 2007: 13). Such a 'counter' strategy specifically interrupts the paradigms that Phillips identifies as legacies of modernist thinking, such as art/artifact or secular/religious binaries, by refusing to display objects as one or the other, or as illustrations of a chronology. Instead, the sheer mass of 'uninterpreted' objects takes on the 'cumulative weight' of history, and indeed functions as 'the evidence' of the havoc caused by the colonial encounter (Phillips 2006: 78).

The postcolonial discourse enacted by Rickard and supported by Phillips parallels the poststructuralist grounding of the New Museology, as both theoretical projects attempt to bring to the fore the power structures inherent in the museology of the past; the former for the empowerment of previously colonized societies and cultures, the latter for a re-evaluation of the visitor. Where both New Museology and postcolonial discourse have converged is on the status of objects. The New Museology demands a revaluation of objects, perhaps even their replacement, as it challenges the traditional top-down method of institutional and curatorial authority historically inherent in museum practice. Also interested in challenging the past institutional authority of the museum, postcolonial critiques implicate many objects as possessing extremely troubled origins in colonial-era collections and their home museums, institutions that often acted as extensions of the colonial project itself (Coombes 1998; Macdonald 2003).

As echoed in Rickard's curatorial statement above, the NMAI's exhibitions fall into the overlap between New Museology and postcolonial thought. Objects of gold radiating out from a golden center or dozens of guns lined up in parallel rows, without object labels or curatorial interpretation, refuted or interrupted traditional western museological practice, and in so doing furthered the postcolonial project. In addition to being a Native space, the NMAI was an intentionally postcolonial, non-western space (Smith 2005).

Or was it? While the New Museology served as a major second critical lens through which to view and analyze the NMAI, few critics traced the NMAI collections and institutional existence back to their origins: the 1989 merger of New York City's Museum of the American Indian (MAI) into the Smithsonian museum system. With the merger, nearly one million Native American objects from the Heye collection — the collection left by George Gustav Heye, an independently wealthy and avid collector of Native American culture and objects around the turn of the twentieth century — were added to the Smithsonian's collections. Few reviews of the NMAI reference the Heye collection at all; those that do gloss over the troubled history of the MAI with a vague mention of 'problems,' a grouping of the 'measures' taken by 'trustees and other interested parties' between 1957 and 1989 to ensure the collection's survival, or a detailed discussion of Heye the collector, but not Heye the dealer or Heye the museum director (Blue Spruce 2004: Chapter 3; Evelyn 2006: 52; Jacknis 2006: 523).

Thus, while critics mourned the absence of objects in the NMAI displays, they were demanding objects that they in fact knew little about. Heye, like many collectors of his generation, held to a loose ethical frame when obtaining and maintaining his collections (Fowler 2008). He is known to have lied to both collectors and institutions, outmuscled competitors with sheer funds, dug in unregulated or illegal areas, and falsified records or neglected provenance altogether. Hard hit in the Depression, particularly due to the untimely deaths of his most generous benefactors, Heye developed an illegal 'sell to operate' policy — a policy that continued over successive MAI directorships.

Native trustees of the MAI moved in the 1970s to report such backdoor selling of the MAI artifacts to New York's attorney general; a state-ordered inventory in 1975 showed that the current one million objects were a mere quarter of the original collection. State action obtained a new director for the MAI, but did little to solve the museum's financial issues. Several private



Figure 3. Wall of guns, Our Peoples gallery. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Katherine Fogden.

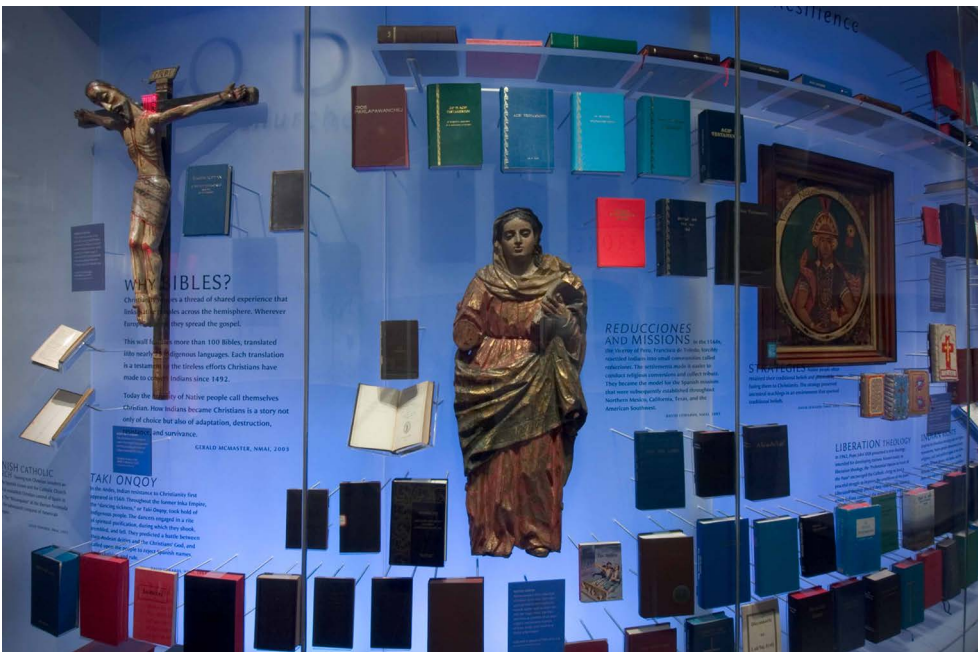


Figure 4. Wall of bibles, Our Peoples gallery. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Katherine Fogden.

parties, including Ross Perot, made offers to buy the MAI collection upon pain of removal across state lines (Heye had specified that the collection must always remain in New York City). While indignant New Yorkers fought to retain the MAI, by 1986 the museum was in dire financial straights, propped up almost completely by board members' private funds.

What subsequently happened and why, and who gets the credit, depends on who one listens to. From MAI personnel to New York City politicians, various claims were made about the series of events that led up to the development of the NMAI. Consistent in these versions of the NMAI's history, however, is the place of the NMAI. Rather than the founding or pinnacle of any Native story, the NMAI is instead the end result of the life and fate of a collection in the political arena. Objects take center stage.

The fate of the Heye objects and their value were in fact the chief concern communicated during the congressional committee hearings for HR 2668, the proposed bill that eventually became Public Law 101-185. As Robert McCormick Adams, then-Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, testified, 'I would like to support enthusiastically the emphasis that appeared throughout [presiding committee chair Ben Nighthorse Campbell's] own remarks on the strategic importance of this collection and of its coming to Washington with regard to reaching American Indian people themselves' ('Establishment' 1989: 3). Adams then outlined the Smithsonian's objectives to develop the potential of the collection to the fullest, which included traveling exhibitions and a contemporary arts program. Such objectives, Adams assured the hearing audience, would dwarf all previous Smithsonian efforts to collect, document, and exhibit Native cultures — mere 'training wheels' in comparison with the museum that would come ('Establishment' 1989: 9). As Adams continued,

These costs [of building the NMAI facilities and transferring the collection], of course, must be weighed in the light of an extraordinary opportunity — indeed, an obligation — to preserve a collection of monumental significance, make it more accessible than it ever has been, and to share it fully with those whose ancestors created the objects within it. ('Establishment' 1989: 7)

When Campbell questions Adams in response to Adams' offered testimony, the troubled status of the MAI and Smithsonian collections emerges. Campbell first asks if other government-held collections of Native-created objects might also be transferred to the new museum. He then asks Adams to clarify the number of Native American remains held by the Smithsonian at the time ('Establishment' 1989: 16). From this point forward, repatriation legislation is intimately tied to that of the creation of the NMAI. In the transcript of the hearings on HR 2668, more than 285 pages cover repatriation, a debate that finally culminates in the 1990 Native Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The original connection between what are afterward thought of as separate legislation bills illustrate Fath Davis Ruffins' point that illegal objects are an 'objective correlative' to America's popular imaginings of the nation's Native Americans (Ruffins 1997: 93). The two cannot be separated, and Ruffins likewise reads the creation of the NMAI — 'the first attempt at creating a hemispheric Indigenous imaginary' to specifically combat America's Native mythos — as a 'stop-gap' measure in the face of the threat of all-out repatriation of museum-owned objects (Rickard 2007: 86; Ruffins 1997: 97). Objects become the real issue, with the NMAI simply a footnote.

Vine Deloria, Jr, a Heye Foundation trustee at the time of the HR 2668 committee hearings, framed the Heye collection in a similarly complicated relationship. On one hand, Native objects do not, in essence, matter: 'All of us on the board [of the Heye Foundation] believe that culture is a living thing and not a series of pots or arrowheads that can be stacked up in warehouses or even display cases' ('Establishment' 1989: 19). Yet the MAI collection needed to be saved, for, Deloria posited, it stood as an international treasure on the level of Greece's Elgin Marbles and China's Forbidden City, '...a unique, priceless, unparalleled collection which embodies and exemplifies the entire history and cultural heritage of great peoples — the indigenous peoples of this hemisphere, the Native Americans of North, South and Central America' ('Establishment' 1989: 21).

Deloria, Jr had been on the MAI board in the 1970s, and had himself been one of the trustees that had reported the illegal sale of MAI objects to New York's attorney general. The irony of the situation in 1989 was perhaps quite painful to him, or to other Native trustees at the

time: Native Americans were fighting to save a collection that in fact represented the plundering of their own peoples. But the threat of the collection's objects landing on the black market or disappearing into private hands was a real one, and one that, seemingly, could only be leveraged by the institutional power of a national museum. Power, in this instance, is extended twice over, as Native Americans called on the power of the Smithsonian as a museum to take over the MAI collection, in essence maintaining that collection's attendant colonial power over and above indigenous agency. Or, in another rephrasing: indigenous agency could only be exercised through colonial power structures when it came to the redemption of Native-made objects caught in a colonial-era collection.

Objects and the Catch-22 of Colonial Power

This second narrative tale makes evident the fact that the issues of Native agency and identity, and these issues' attendant postcolonial frameworks, were added to the NMAI project only after the museum was legally established and underway. Instead, the NMAI began with deeply troubled and highly conflicted 'objective correlatives': objects with layers of meanings and implications that had no easy 'way back' to a pre-colonial — or postcolonial — indigenous existence, despite the theoretical underpinnings that claimed such a 'recapturing' or 'postcolonizing' was possible.

Did Rickard, and those on staff at the NMAI, truly believe that New Museology presented a way to undo the colonial powers and structures that still shaped the limits of Native sovereignty, and in particular had shaped the legal creation of the NMAI itself? Yes they did, in the eyes of the NMAI's reviewers, both negative and positive. Having placed itself firmly and publicly within the New Museology from the start of its planning process, the NMAI garnered massive support in the museum community, years before it even opened its first set of doors (Gurian 1991; Simpson 2001). These early backers tended to discuss the NMAI in revolutionary terms, as an institution that would change the very ground of museum making. Later pro-NMAI reviewers, particularly those of the second wave, chided negative first-wave reviewers as being blind to the museum's heavy theoretical backing (Cobb 2005; Smith 2005). This response set the pattern for the NMAI's own critical response, as NMAI staff leveled the same diatribe against their critics: you simply do not understand the theory that sits at the core of what we do. The unfortunate result was that NMAI staff shut down the constructive criticism published by Native scholars of the second wave, in addition to those 'outside' the museum's discourse (Rickard 2007: 85).

Granted, many negative respondents did not in fact 'get' what the museum was doing — or 'getting it,' did not care for it. But while NMAI staff claimed that critics missed the core mission of the NMAI, they could not see that they had in fact set up a 'false face' for respondents: the New Museology. Aligned so completely with the New Museology, the NMAI had set itself up as the discourse's largest test case to date. New Museology practices dominated the reviews, with little attention paid to the museum's origins or its troubled collections. Historian Stephen Conn vigorously opposed the NMAI's use of multimedia 'products of the ADD generation' and non-contextualized displays (Conn 2006: 71), which he found to be the most troubling aspects of the museum. Conn claimed that such techniques, as utilized by the NMAI and other ethnic museums, situate these institutions in the realm of the personal, or what Conn terms the 'therapeutic' (Conn 2010: 45). These so-called therapeutic museums are 'designed to make us better people', and as such demonstrate a consistent 'unease about objects', as if objects may tell a story different from the therapeutic one that such institutions have worked so hard to construct (Conn 2010: 48).

Conn's critique of the NMAI has a great deal in common with a number of Native reviewers, especially those who identify themselves or their stance with Native activism. Second- and third-wave Native reviewers Amy Lonetree (2006a, 2006b), Sonya Atalay (2006), and Myla Vicenti Carpio (2006) all harshly critiqued what they saw as the absence of Native history in the NMAI exhibitions. Like Conn's projected visitors who experienced much but learned nothing while at the NMAI, the projected visitors of Lonetree, Atalay, and Carpio left the NMAI with the same assumptions and stereotypes that they had entered with.

Ironically, these Native reviewers, self-identifying as activists, missed the historical strands that stretched from the Red Power movement forward to the NMAI itself. The forebear

of the NMAI is the Native American museum called for by the Alcatraz Proclamation (1969), a document outlining the aims and goals of the Native American takeover and occupation of Alcatraz prison and island in November 1969:

Some of the present buildings will be taken over to develop an American Indian museum which will depict our native food and other cultural contributions we have given to the world. Another part of the museum will present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation (as symbolized by old tin cans, barbed wire, rubber tires, plastic containers, etc.).... The museum will show the noble and tragic events of Indian history, including the broken treaties, the documentary of the Trail of Tears, the Massacre of Wounded Knee, as well as the victory over Yellow-Hair Custer and his army. (McMaster and Trafzer 2004: 187)

Before the postcolonial agenda ever made its way onto the theoretical and academic stage, Native American activists were already calling for a Native museum, run and programmed by Native Americans. Exhibitions in the proposed museum were to be designed along three prongs: Native contributions to world society, colonial contributions to Native culture, and Native history. Objects were important only for the second section, and then only on the symbolic level, as stand-ins for the colonial legacy. For Native activists in the 1960s, the New Museology already existed; the NMAI had to wait for the academy to catch up — nearly forty years later at the time of the Mall opening — to find the theory needed to justify itself to an academic and critical public. Rickard states that the NMAI specifically avoided Native history, knowing the academic subfield was not widely accepted within the academy — and would thus be critically rejected (Rickard 2007: 85). This formulation suggests that the incorporation of New Museology was in fact a strategic choice on the part of the NMAI to align itself with a critical academic base.

But what of the history that the Alcatraz Proclamation had also called for, especially when the academic subfield of Native history had been nixed? This question brings the narrative round again to the difficult object status of the NMAI/MAI collections. The 'objects' to be displayed in the Alcatraz Native museum were not from the museological world. Collections of Native-made objects such as the NMAI's, so tightly wrapped in the catch-22 of colonial power, had no place in the Alcatraz Proclamation. At the NMAI, however, this catch-22 takes the place of history. The tainted objects are read by Rickard and others as the very testimony of that history; nothing more is needed. Object displays sit at the very crux of historical appropriation — appropriation committed by both the colonized and the colonizers. As Paul Chaat Smith writes to introduce the spine of guns (see Figure 4), 'Native people made guns their own, using the new technology as they used all new technologies: to shape their lives and future' (Atalay 2006: 603). Critics like Conn, Lonetree, and Atalay register a range of emotional responses to this text, from 'upsetting' to 'downright creepy' (Atalay 2006: 603; Conn 2006: 72). What these respondents miss is the correlation between this textual ascription of agency, and the acts of the contemporary Native curators themselves, who were, like their forebears, given the tools of western colonizers — this time, a museum and its collections — to shape the presentation of Native lives.

Here, the two tales meet, as the reading of agency onto appropriated and colonized objects becomes critical for those Native scholars and artists involved with the NMAI. Three years after its opening date, Jolene Rickard insisted that the NMAI building still stands as a statement of difference, and the project as a whole represents a 'triumph' in 'the first attempt at creating a hemispheric Indigenous imaginary' (Rickard 2007: 87, 86). The New Museology, however, complicates this utopian reading of the NMAI's end result, and not least because of the critical response to the museum that the New Museology has engendered. Firstly, the New Museology failed to provide the museum with tools for a critical examination of its objects outside of the 'radical' display techniques used for gold, guns, and bibles — the 'cultural contributions we have given to the world' followed by 'some of the things the white man has given to the Indians' carried forward from the Alcatraz Proclamation. Secondly, part of the critique of the New Museology rests on the practices' dangerous association with the forces of capitalism, as attempts to grant visitors 'experiences' have been seen as moves to compete with the

capitalist ventures of theme parks, adventure rides, and family fun attractions. Sharp critics of the New Museology read NMAI's audience 'interactions' (such as videos, audio tracks, or the spines of unlabeled objects) as tell-tale signs of participation in what has come to be called the 'heritage industry,' or the product packaging and marketing of one's own past to a consumer audience. Operating on a global scale, the heritage industry is suspect for its flattening of culture through that culture's performance within an international capitalist framework. The attendant social conditions of global capitalism that have produced the New Museology thus change Rickard's triumphant announcement of 'a hemispheric Indigenous imaginary' into the creeping sameness of capitalist production.

In the early years of the New Museology, art historian Donald Preziosi identified the most troubling aspect of New Museology's literature to be 'the belief that exhibition and display could, under certain specifiable circumstances or achievable conditions, be unproblematical' (Berlo et al. 1995: 13). Museology, according to Preziosi, is firmly grounded in the colonial project, and cannot be anything else. Preziosi's critique stands in direct contrast to the New Museology of Ruth Phillips (discussed above), which labels museum practices that break down the paradigms of modernism as practices that radically 'undo' the modernist/colonialist project. Preziosi argues that such 'undoing' actually rests on the very modernism it opposes, as such undoing is believed possible through the core modernist belief that art and display can be non-political, non-problematic, and neutral — or, as perhaps Phillips would say, 'neutralizing' (Berlo et al. 1995: 16; also Hilden and Huhndorf 1999). To neutralize, Lonetree argues, the New Museology and its attendant postcolonialist/poststructuralist project must revert to abstractions — the very language of canonical modernism — to appeal to the 'universalist multiculturalist[t]' (Lonetree 2006b: 640; also Hilden and Huhndorf 1999: 171). In other words, the 'global discourse' claimed as a tool for the postcolonial project by Rickard and historians of Native art like Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips contrarily sits within the very modernity that they decry — a modernity that potentially rejects the specificity of the NMAI's 'Indigenous imaginary' in favor of widespread sameness (Kurin 2007).

Contradictions shaped the NMAI from the institution's founding. The original idea proposed by Senator Daniel Inouye in 1987 that eventually became HR 2668 was a grave and memorial on the Washington Mall, under which all Smithsonian indigenous remains that could not be returned to tribal members would be buried (Force 1999: 371). The language of 'memorial' was retained throughout the NMAI project, as the NMAI framed itself as a 'living memorial to Native Americans and their traditions,' a museum dedicated to 'living cultures' and their 'survival' ('Establishment' 1989; Conn 2006: 71; Evelyn 2006: 52; Evelyn and Hirsch 2006: 87; West 1993: 6). Yet just as the Heye collection cannot be 'resolved' in its position between Native and colonial agency, how does one reconcile the contrasts expressed in the term 'living memorial'? Perhaps the better question is: Should one? Why is the reconciliation of different worldviews and startling contrasts a goal of current museology at all?

The establishment of the NMAI and its attendant histories and responses land us in the midst of quagmires — objective, theoretical, practical, historical — that the New Museology can pose alternatives to, but cannot in itself resolve. NMAI, and indigenous museum praxis as a whole, often finds itself with two masters: individual indigenous communities and a postcolonial agenda. The first is highly localized, particularized, and personal; the second is global, abstract, and structural. Yet the NMAI attempted to serve both through the single tool of the New Museology. The difference between (and need for) object interventions on one hand, and the empowerment of indigenous communities across the Americas on the other, never emerges in the institution's displays or language, as staff believed that addressing one through the New Museology would automatically address and involve the other. This institutional conflation of goals and the attendant failure to acknowledge and articulate the underlying, unresolvable contradictions (as discussed above) produced the wide variety of narratives seen in the waves of critical response.

What if the NMAI had displayed its many quagmires front and center? Or had addressed the limits of its agency in relation to its goals and collections? Such a museum is difficult to imagine. In her early writings on the NMAI, consultant Elaine Gurian admitted that, despite her hopes for the NMAI to move the entire field of museology forward, the finished product would likely 'not look as radical as we would wish because we cannot yet imagine an altogether new

institution' (Gurian 1991: 191). Perhaps the most radical museum yet, and as yet unimagined, is one that sites itself in the midst of its own contradictions and limitations.

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Notes

- ¹ Special thanks to Andrew Herscher, Paul Chaat Smith, and three anonymous reviewers who read and gave comments on various versions of this article. Thanks also to Raymond Silverman and Bradley Taylor of the Museum Studies Program at the University of Michigan for their support.
- ² The first wave were journalists, who were overwhelmingly critical of the museum. The second and third waves largely consisted of scholars — the former defending the museum in the face of the first critical responses, the latter critiquing the scholars of the second. The third wave critiques are often found in roundtables, special issues of scholarly journals (such as Lonetree 2006c), or edited volumes (such as Lonetree and Cobb 2008).
- ³ 'New Museology' is a somewhat amorphous category that covers both a wide range of literature within the academy, and a proliferation of curatorial and educational practices within the museum profession. Ruth Phillips identifies three 'strands' to the literature on New Museology, while Peter Vergo defines any critique of the 'old' museums as 'new' (Phillips 2011: 18-21; Vergo 1989: 1-5). The key reference points given by Phillips and Vergo include works by Michael Ames, Arjun Appadurai, Tony Bennett, James Clifford, Annie Coombes, Carol Duncan, Brian Durrans, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, Robert Lumley, Sally Price, Nicholas Thomas, and Susan Vogel. While varied in their approaches and conclusions, these authors represent a major paradigm shift in how society approaches the role of museums, primarily moving away from authoritative institutional models. The changes in praxis that then build on this shift largely reside in the work, policies, and publications of museum professionals.
- ⁴ Upon retirement, West commented that many were surprised to see that he in fact carried through in delivering exactly what he had promised as early as 1991 (Trescott 2006).
- ⁵ 'The museum different' is used as early as 1991 by NMAI consultant Elaine Gurian (2006). The phrase and its sentiments appear repeatedly in Heye Center publications; see Hilden and Huhndorf (1999: 161-2) for a summary. West invokes the phrase to mean different things for different audiences; compare West (1993) to West (2009). For details on the goals and function of the fourth museum, see Message (2009).
- ⁶ The café's name 'Mitsitam' is Piscataway for 'let's eat,' and the Piscataway word 'potomac,' or 'where the goods are brought in,' names the performance hall. The building's landscape process was extensive, and included the seeding of more than twenty-eight thousand plant species in four types of environments. See Appendix 2 of Blue Spruce and Thrasher (2008: 145-9) for listings of plantings.
- ⁷ For an analysis on the effectiveness of the NMAI as an agent of political ideology in the social sphere, see Coffee (2006).
- ⁸ The legal definitions of who is and who is not an 'American Indian' guided the NMAI project from the beginning, as such definitions were directly written into HR 2668, the museum's establishing legislation. 'American Indian' refers to a formally affiliated member of a tribe recognized by the US government. 'Native American' refers to anyone who claims any indigenous background, anywhere in the Western hemisphere. Brian Jungen, as an artist with Dunne-za First Nations and Swiss-Canadian ancestry, would not be recognized as an American Indian under US legal code. The NMAI exhibition 'IndiVisible: African-Native American Lives in the Americas' is another exhibition that challenges the formulation and imposed restriction of these legal definitions.

- ⁹ See Blue Spruce and Thrasher (2008: 17) for mandate specifics.
- ¹⁰ A particular case in point is the Native American halls of the National Museum of Natural History, which were halfway through the redesign stage when their funds were cut in 2004 (West 2009). The project has not yet been revived.
- ¹¹ The Public Historian roundtable of 2006 (vol. 28, no. 2), for instance, was solely based on the NMAI's exhibitions.
- ¹² Phillips' equation of modernity with stable categorical binaries comes from the work of Bruno Latour (Phillips 2011: 298-9).
- ¹³ Phillips also presents the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's display of masses of shoes, hair, and eyeglasses from Holocaust victims as a similar 'counter-installation'.
- ¹⁴ See Carpenter (2005) for details.
- ¹⁵ Roland Force (then-director of MAI) gives credit for connecting Force with Senator Daniel Inouye, the sponsor of the NMAI legislation, to an unnamed television exec; Force also presents the creation of the NMAI as the 'saving' of the MAI (Force 1999: 371-3; Dedication). In contrast, Don Fowler (the spouse of an NMAI trustee) recounts how David Rockefeller narrated a tale in which Rockefeller contacted Senator Inouye, with the intention of preventing Ross Perot from buying New York's museum (Fowler 2008: 178).
- ¹⁶ Public Law 101-185 signed the NMAI into law.
- ¹⁷ Previous Smithsonian efforts referred to in the hearing included the Bureau of American Ethnology, the Smithsonian Department of Anthropology, and the National Museum of Natural History.
- ¹⁸ In the hearing, Adams put the number of Smithsonian remains at eighteen thousand.
- ¹⁹ 'Illegal objects' is a vague and wide category in an indigenous context, due to changing legal definitions and research practices over the last two centuries. Some of the most contentious types today include human remains, illegally obtained objects, or culturally sacred objects, all of which are today considered unethical to possess. For fuller accounts of America's popular imaginings, see Berkhofer (1978), Truettner (1991), and Deloria (1998).
- ²⁰ See, for example, Douglas Evelyn's defenses in Evelyn (2006) and Evelyn and Hirsch (2006). Guest curator Jolene Rickard (2007) used New Museology to back up her display choices, and even as late as 2009, Richard West still employed this line of defense for the museum, over and against the first wave of negative responses (West 2009).
- ²¹ This following of the Alcatraz plan seems intentional on the part of NMAI staff and consultants, as planning for the first display case started with Native New World contributions of 'potatoes, rubber, and corn'. These topics were dropped when they proved to be without visual appeal (Rickard 2007: 88).
- ²² Heritage scholars particularly drawn on in the second and third waves of NMAI critiques are David Lowenthal and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Hildren and Huhndorf 1999; Conn 2006). For a detailed examination of the relationship between emerging museum models, heritage, and capitalism, see 'Part I: Exhibitionary Complexes' of Karp et al (2007: 35-202).
- ²³ The extreme difference between these two becomes clear when one delves into the documented social effects of colonialism. See, for instance, Frantz Fanon's description of the individual 'sealed' into 'objecthood' under colonialism: 'I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects' (Fanon 1967: 109). Freeing members of society from their 'sealed' status as 'objects' seems a long way from the New Museology's object interventions offered to museum visitors.

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