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COMMENTARY

Contested Conversations: Presentations, Expectations, and Responsibility at the National Museum of the American Indian

JOANNE BARKER AND CLAYTON DUMONT

The National Museum of the American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the Western Hemisphere.

NMAI Mission Statement

This essay interrogates the politics of representation, expectation, and responsibility at the new National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. We explore the interpretive contests (between and among Natives and non-Natives) provoked by the museum's representational strategies. Flushing out some of these complexities, we point to the culturally contingent bases of visitors' disappointments, confusions, and pleasures. We suggest that the NMAI pushes visitors to take responsibility for the familiarity and ignorance

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(and often these are part of the same interpretive package) that they bring through the doors of the NMAI. The power-laden politics of recognition, identity, and narration—as played out in the cross-cultural and intracultural exchanges at work in the museum—are shown to be fundamental to any interpretive possibility. As Indians who are also academics, our own—sometimes-tumultuous—reactions to these productive difficulties structure the analysis.

Visiting the NMAI not long after its opening, we felt immediately implicated within and by the museum's mission and exhibitions. Both of us quickly realized that we had entered the museum first as Native people and not as scholars. Indeed, we each experienced an unexpected range of visceral reactions to the NMAI. Similar to other academics, we are trained to be less passionate and more analytical about our research subjects. But the museum put us on edge. It called us out, emotionally.

Preparing for her visit, Barker worked hard to put aside her hopes for the NMAI's engagement with the politics of federal recognition. She wanted to see more than a history of policy. She wanted to see the tribes' discursive struggles over self-definition laid bare. Often far more than strained interactions between tribes and the United States, these ugly, sometimes secretive, politics of tribal status and tribal identity occur between tribes and among feuding factions within tribes. Her expectations were driven by Delaware conflicts with the Cherokee over Delaware status and rights as a tribe and the NMAI's promise to include a diversity of Native peoples and perspectives rooted in a process of tribal consultation. Even before arriving at the museum in February 2005, a month before the Cherokee's suit against the Delaware would result in the termination of the Delaware's status as a tribe, Barker wondered how she would respond to the NMAI's interactions with these issues. Just what tribes had the NMAI consulted? What tribes would be included? How did the NMAI define tribal status and rights of inclusion? What kinds of intertribal politics had informed the consultation process and resulting installations? How did unrecognized tribes figure into the NMAI's mission and installations? She found the NMAI's direct, uneven, conflicted, and complex approach to these issues important and difficult.

Given his interest in knowledge politics and representational strategies, Dumont found himself negotiating an unanticipated and palpable pride and sense of relief in the museum. As he watched a young, articulate Native woman telling a story about star objects to a small group of children in the Our Universes gallery, finally, *finally*, he felt, our views, the views of Native peoples, are being told. And it brought some snickering satisfaction. Non-Native visitors are often not amused by the museum or its representational strategies. The stories *they* want to hear are most often absent. At the least, they are confronted by the fact that those all too familiar depictions of Native peoples as mere players within larger Euro-American stories are relegated to the margins or co-opted into Native recollections that transform them into something else altogether. This felt cathartic. Here, he thought—throughout this beautiful, poignant facility—all the well-meaning and wholly misinformed “friends of the Indian” that Native peoples have dealt with over the years will finally come face to face with their own hubris.

Given the intractably complex dialogues between its published mission and the wildly competing expectations of its visitors and reviewers, the museum's open invitation for *skepticism, exploration, encounter, reflection, and argument*² is what we found most gratifying. There are few easy answers about Native history, culture, or identity presented within the NMAI, but there are many intellectually challenging and emotionally potent representations that invite reply. These provocations are deeply embedded in larger legal and cultural contests over and about Native peoples—contests that continue to structure relations among Indian nations and between Natives and non-Natives. The museum does not hide from these complexities. Thus we think the NMAI has positioned itself as a center for unabashed, unflinching debate about the politics of representing Native peoples, even as we recognize that many will not accept or be up for the challenge.

ON THE POLITICS OF BEING FEDERALLY RECOGNIZED, OR NOT, AT THE NMAI

Scholars have mapped out well the history of federal recognition policies and the not so subtle ways that these policies have been informed by inhumanely racist ideologies and practices.³ But there are other types of recognition that are important and far less documented. The harder histories to tell—tribal secrets and all—are not only how Native peoples have invited or otherwise accommodated federal categories and criteria of recognition to get what they want from the US government, but how they have negotiated the terms of recognition to get what they want from their own tribal governments and from one another. Recognition brings and supports powerful sets of histories, meanings, and identities. For tribes and for tribal members, federal recognition is a basis for personal and political efficacy.

In November 2004, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in *Cherokee Nation v. Norton & Delaware* that a 1996 decision by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to reinstate the Delaware's recognition status, which had been illegally repealed in 1979, was "contrary to Supreme Court precedent and the Federally Recognized Indian Tribe List Act" of 1994.⁴ They reasoned that in *Cherokee Nation v. Journeycake* (1864) and *Delaware Indians v. Cherokee Nation* (1903) the Supreme Court had established a precedent for the interpretation of an 1867 agreement between the tribes as having enacted the Delaware's *incorporation* into the Cherokee Nation as *Cherokee*.⁵ Ignoring relevant Delaware treaties and historical relations with the United States as an Indian nation, the court ruled that the BIA had ignored the precedent and violated recognition procedures as defined by the 1994 act in 1996. The court found against the BIA, ruling for the retermination of the Delaware as a tribe. This decision abrogated BIA government-to-government relations with the Delaware and all commensurate obligations for federal consultancy under the terms of the 1994 act.

In March 2005, the Delaware voted to appropriate funds from their endowment to file a petition before the Supreme Court to fight removal from the list of federally recognized tribes. Among other things, their removal

effects the loss of close to \$7 million in federal grants that include funds for a community child development center, a health and wellness center, and the employment of close to fifty tribal workers. This situation is, in fundamental ways, the result of historical legal and economic conflicts between the Delaware and the Cherokee over competing land claims in Oklahoma, access to federal resources, and Delaware desires for autonomy from the Cherokee. Changing Delaware status, in the political forums where recognition matters, remains a personal challenge for Barker to negotiate. She was born in 1962 and enrolled/recognized as Delaware; terminated in 1979 as Delaware, only qualified/recognized as Cherokee; reinstated in 1996 as Delaware; and terminated as Delaware again in 2005.

Dumont has also struggled with the politics of recognition. He was born eight years after the 1954 Termination Act, which quickly brought cultural, social-psychological, and economic disasters for the Klamath people. Between 1954 and 1987, Klamath identity was effectively erased. In the span of a generation, his people went from being one of the only self-sufficient Indian nations in the country—a strong tribal community sustained by a six-hundred-thousand-acre reservation filled with fish, game, and old-growth timber—to landless, impoverished members of the local underclass who were ruthlessly preyed upon by racist merchants and police. He grew up knowing almost exclusively only those Indians who struggled every day with the immediate, real-life consequences of this forced termination. For the most part, emotionally and psychologically healthy Klamath were not among his early role models. Later he struggled with the economic consequences of termination. Not only were the Klamath broke and no longer in possession of tribal institutions that could have helped with his education, federal programs designed to help Native peoples acquire education were also not available to him. He ran up large debts and worked long hours to pay his way through school. With reinstatement of federal recognition in 1986 came a turn for the better. Although the Klamath tribes (which include the Modoc and Yahooskin Band of the Snake) have not yet regained a viable land base, tribal institutions and the community have begun to heal. Klamath kids are now getting help with the costs of their educations, tribal members are employed on and around their traditional lands, and the elders have good housing.

So we, and many other Natives in the United States, understand and have lived with the arbitrariness of federal recognition in consequential ways that matter to our individual and collective sense of self, community, and well-being. Given the current terrain of US politics, it is certainly more comfortable and empowering to be a member of a recognized tribe and to be included as a full participant in the national political forums of policy making. It is much harder work to fight for inclusion as an Indian person, as an Indian tribe—in the legal and cultural forums where inclusion is determined by the recognition status of one's tribe—than to be recognized, be invited, be acknowledged.⁶

But the real rub of it all, so to speak, is not merely when the United States perpetuates its legalistic and bureaucratic assaults on tribal status, including exclusions from services and funding—though the consequences of these decisions are material and lasting. It is when the same categories and

criteria of recognition are invoked *as if legitimate* within the space of social and interpersonal relations between tribes and Indian peoples that it feels like the real termination has taken place. It is one thing, after all, to manipulate recognition policies to get what one wants from the US government; it is quite another thing when the violent histories and material conditions of exclusion and termination are ignored in relationships among Indian peoples.⁷

These thoughts and feelings were with us as we took our seats in the Lelawi Theater. *Lelawi* is a Delaware word meaning *in the middle*, signifying the orienting intent of the theater. The theater seats 120 people in a circle on multiple steps facing the center. In the center is a large boulder with three screens around it. At various locations throughout the room are display cases with different types of single objects, including pottery and beadwork. The thirteen-minute multimedia presentation, entitled “Who We Are,” makes use of projected images onto the screens (mostly of people), the boulder (mostly of water), and the oval ceiling (mostly of the sky), supplemented by light work on the objects in the display cases. It is difficult to summarize because the experience of the presentation is so multisensory.

The presentation begins: “Mother Earth rolls and turns towards the sun. The water flow, life force connecting us all. . . . Let us bring our minds together as we acknowledge our connection to all life. Let us bring our minds together, to greet each other as human beings.” The sounds of thunder, music, and rain and the images are enveloping. We can almost feel ourselves within the scenes as different men and women narrate over waves crashing onto a pebble beach (projected onto the boulder in the center of the room), an eagle and raven crying overhead, a soft drum beating while a Miqmac woman sings, a hawk crying as it flies by, and the sounds of a rattlesnake:

Woman: Haida Gwaii. It’s a feeling. It’s—it’s who I am.

Man: We’re not living out an ancient fantasy. This is the way it is.

Man: And that seems like a simple thing but yet it means a lot of fighting for us to protect our land.

Woman: Kejimikujik is almost like a web, because you have the natural environment and the human presence interwoven as one.

Man: Corn is called *The Mother* to Hopi.

Man: We do not claim the land: we are only here, working with the elements, working with our ceremonies.

Lest the audience become too comfortable with the notion that Indians are only found and meaningful in these natural environments, we are thrown abruptly into an urban space with the sounds of a city, a helicopter, a barking dog, and, at the fore, a protest song. Then the scene changes again, becoming more rural, and we hear cattle bells and hoofs. David Lewiston performs the music of Torallay Toro; an eagle cries overhead:

Man: The land is not a being that should be possessed. The land is a living entity that feels, that also has emotions, that according to how we treat it, that’s how it will treat us.

Man: We believe that Mother Earth is our goddess. She gives us food, drink, and fertility—Pachamama nurtures us.

Next, we are introduced to several individuals who discuss their relationships to specific places, ceremonies, and other beings: a Lakota man talks about his people's connection and responsibilities to the Paha Sapa (Black Hills); a Peyote healing song is performed by Robbie Robertson; a man carves a pipe and discusses the importance of prayer; and various men and women of the Inupiaq Nation address their interdependence with the bowhead whale. An easy but sharp cut follows to Hidden Medicine, performed by Red Thunder, and a Muscogee stomp dance song, shaking and shouting in the background:

Woman: Our people were the Mound Builders, an old, old civilization from the Mississippian culture. A lot of our land was ceded to the US government and our people were forced—removed out of the south-eastern part of the US.

Man: One of the things that we carried on our back was the fire from each of our tribal towns. That represented our direct, universal link to our Creator.

Man: And that is what keeps us strong as people today: we know where we come from; we know who we are.

A gavel hits a table:

Speaker: Good morning to the Muscogee Creek Nation National Council of Representatives. First order of business is . . .

Man (narrating over the original voice): The current government of the Muscogee Creek Nation is a three-branch government. We like to believe that the US government was patterned after our system of government.

Council Woman (returning to the voices of the meeting): Pastors in the Methodist church preach in Creek and English, and when they pray in Creek the connection is there, and I'm asking you today to hold on to that identity. Thank you.

Speaker: Any discussion? (An elder responds in Creek and we don't follow.)

Chief Perry Beaver (in a close-up removed again from the council meeting): I'd say about three generations back, when the chiefs went to Washington, they took their peace pipes and warbonnets. When I go to Washington now I take a briefcase and a couple lawyers with me. So times have changed. (There are sounds of children playing behind him.)

Man: Each time the nation strives to move toward the betterment of the people, there's so many obstacles that we have to overcome.

Man: Not only the Muscogee Creek Nation but all tribes in the US would like to be self-sufficient. (Construction sounds in the background, indicating the progress of infrastructure in the community.)

During the address to the Muscogee Creek Nation's government, individual flags from other tribal nations from around the United States are projected onto the ceiling's screen. It is difficult not to associate the flags with those displayed at the United Nation's headquarters in New York.

Man: The single most important thing we try to preserve here is our sovereignty. Being a sovereign allows us the freedom to operate in a manner that's best for our people. And it allows us to be on an even, level playing field with all the other governments of the world.

The irony of this statement, now being made from within the context of tribal flags, is not lost on us. The museum's introductory presentation—"Who We Are"—is taking place in a theater named in the language of the Delaware, whose legal status and rights as a tribe have just been federally terminated for the second time. This complication is conspicuously absent from the theater and the narrative of the presentation. Or is it? We heard it, but we worry about who will and will not. Should this stinging political irony be made more explicit? Is now the time and space?

The presentation ends with a powwow song and a stomp dance song performed by Robbie Robertson and Sadie Buck and the Six Nation Women Singers. Simultaneously, still photographs of Indian people in multiple social contexts—government, activism, arts, music, sports, fashion, film, conferences, and gatherings of many different kinds—are presented in rapid sequence. The denouement is proud and strong: Indian peoples' cultures have changed, and not always in tragic ways. Tribes have unique but related histories of belief and practice. Indians have strong, thriving governments and continue to struggle for their rights as sovereign nations.

Reflecting on what we saw, we realize that the opening acknowledgment of Mother Earth and peppered references in the presentation to the four directions, prayer, and the sacred made both of us uncomfortable. As an introduction to the NMAL, we worry about how easily these references can and will be misappropriated or misunderstood without the very specific tribal contexts needed to understand not only their cultural significance but the political histories and ethical responsibilities of tribal communities to their unique teachings about the land, the environment, and the spiritual. This is not to say that the presentation was without these contexts. But they were quickly provided and dependent on far more extant understandings that could not be accommodated in such a short introductory presentation.

Barker's discomfort is rooted in the practical and everyday difficulties of her teaching. She has assisted and taught introductory courses in American Indian Studies since the spring term of 1993 at four different universities (as a graduate student at UC Santa Cruz, as a research fellow at Cornell University, and as a faculty member at the University of California, Davis, and San Francisco State University). She knows all too well how obstinate, even after a ten- or sixteen-week course carefully addressing the diversity of American Indian histories and cultures, individuals can remain in their commitments to their own preconceptions, stereotypes, and ideologies about Indians. It is exasperating.

Understanding that the NMAI's mission includes addressing exactly these types of issues, we wonder how it will be responsible to the teachings without making them generic for all Indians. How can the NMAI introduce such incredibly divergent cultural beliefs and political perspectives to people coming from all over the world, from all different backgrounds and understandings, familiarities, and stereotypes about Indians?⁸

To be fair, this particular conceptual problem is an intractable one created by European and the United States' colonization of the Americas and the Pacific. The many tensions between tribal differences of identity and culture on the one hand and the real, imagined, or necessary unities of *the* Indian on the other are amalgamated effects of European colonialism and US nationalism. Indeed, as an intellectual project, the NMAI could make no narrative sense or enjoy no centrally organized purpose or goal without the unifying gaze of Euro-Americans who originally saw and have worked so hard to maintain merely distinct populations of a similarly deficient *other*.⁹ This notion of Indians is only possible for colonial reasons. And clearly, throughout the museum, one of the goals is to undo this Indian. We wonder how and if the introductory presentation could or should make this conundrum explicit to visitors who may not appreciate being forced into considering it.

Detailing the profound links between land and community, not just as a relic of the past but as lived-in systems of knowledge, "Who We Are" contextualizes the difficulties that all Native peoples face in exercising their political rights and living out their cultural beliefs, such as the Lakota's struggle for the return and protection of Paha Sapa and the Inupiaq's dependence on the bowhead whale for economic self-determination. The brief glimpse into the Muscogee Nation's council meeting, visually tied to other Indian nations through the display of tribal flags, illustrates the unique but *shared* challenges faced by tribal governments in meeting the needs of their people and exercising their rights to sovereignty. The presentation closed with stills of contemporary Indians—leaders, activists, artists, musicians, athletes, models, actors, producers, and scholars. The stills returned us to the earlier emphasis on the diversity of Native peoples' politics and cultures.

The obvious difficulty that the NMAI confronts is the gross lack of familiarity that most of its audiences will have with the issues that it is committed to addressing. While we left the theater feeling unexpectedly proud, empowered, and connected to the communities represented in the video, no doubt because we recognized so many of the individuals and events that were represented within it, we were also aware that not everyone else in the room did or would. But perhaps, we thought, that is also a part of the NMAI's objective?

As an introduction to the NMAI, perhaps the strategy in "Who We Are" is to intersperse the familiar with the unfamiliar, to complicate, and thereby introduce visitors to their own ignorance? Perhaps this introduction is one of many efforts by the museum to disrupt representational practices that have been so overdetermined by colonial, racist, or sexist versions of Native histories, cultures, and peoples? And, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of this shifting is that the NMAI will confront, disappoint, and even alienate those who covet a more familiar, unified, domesticated Indian. Familiar frameworks too easily

deployed in the consumption of knowledge of and about Indians have shifted, been complicated, and finally usurped by the Indians of the NMAI.

THE NMAI AS CONTESTED CONVERSATIONS: VISITORS IN NATIVES' SPACES

The exhibit that surrounds you now examines the alchemy that changes the past into stories—histories we tell about it.

Narrator, *Making History*, NMAI, 2004

There is no single narrative undergirding the walk through the NMAI. The museum embraces complexity and seriously, yet playfully, confronts layers of conflicted interpretive agendas. Many stories are told from many peoples' perspectives. It is immediately clear to all who enter that Native peoples have vibrant, modern, and disparate cultures. Preconceptions of a unified pan-Indian history, culture, or identity are quickly unsettled. Even the thought of homogeneity within single tribes is undone by individual self-proclamations of diversity and by unceasing, technologically mediated interactions with many different Native faces and self-presentations. Amid these emphasized differences, the word *alchemy* as a reference to "making history" serves as a hint to visitors and reviewers. Indians are in charge here, and the comforts of institutionalized stories of more familiar, Euro-American fabrications are relentlessly complicated and interrogated. The status of these contested histories as fantastic constructs born of self-indulgence (as alchemy) confronts visitors throughout the presentation floors.

Although not attempting to produce anything resembling a representative sample, Dumont conducted several short interviews with NMAI staff and with non-Native visitors. These interviews suggest that non-Natives are indeed frustrated by what they perceive to be a lack of recognizable, historical Indians. For the visitors he spoke with, Indians remain united as one within a tragic yet romantically nostalgic historical drama that begins in a noble past and ends on the battlefield. These Indians—this drama—is what non-Native visitors came to see and consume. This is *the* Indian they recognize and this is *the* history they want confirmed.

One of Dumont's interviews took place as a middle-aged couple struggled with the installation "Body and Soul" in the Our Lives gallery (see fig. 1). "Body and Soul" includes individual panels entitled "Who is Native?" (on the nature of being identified as Indian), "Who Decides?" (on federal identification policies), "Blood" (on the politics of being identified by blood quantum), "Appearance" (on anthropological descriptions of what Indians look like), "Charted" (on anthropological measurements of Indian facial features), "Documented" (including applications for registration or enrollment with the BIA), a still of James Luna's (Luiseño) *The Artifact Piece* from 1987, "Numbered" (including a replica of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's [Diné/Seminole/Muscogee] *Nobody's Pet Indian* from 1993), and "Government Approved" (on the Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood).

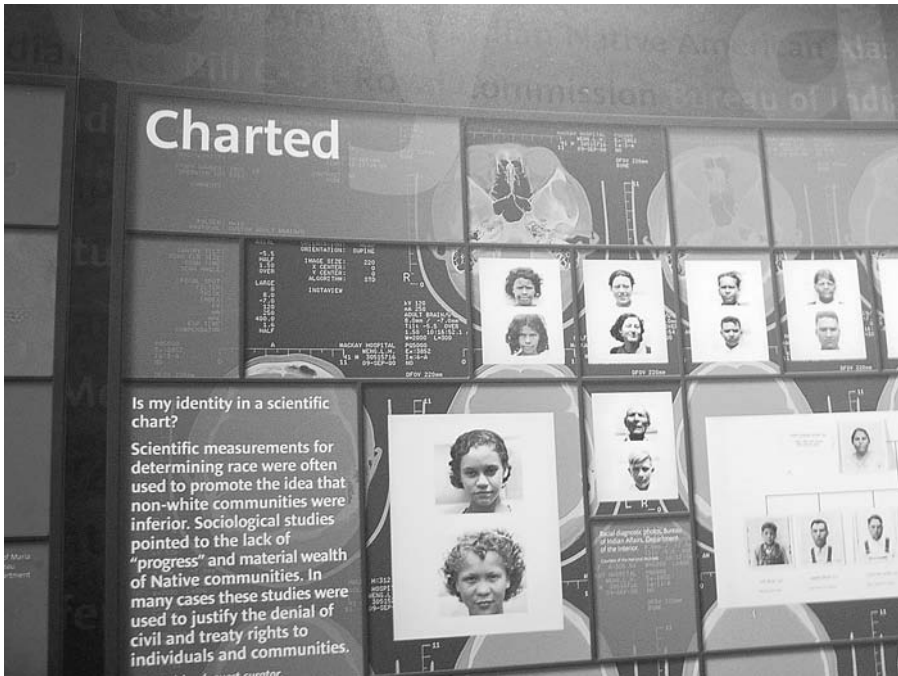


FIGURE 1. “Charted” panel from “Body and Soul” in the *Our Lives* gallery. Photo by Melissa Nelson (Chippewa).

The labels and historical documents in this installation are stark evidence of the racist histories of federal and scientific identifications of Indians and the multiple ways that those identifications have been and still are used to justify colonial ideologies and efforts. Blood quantum, craniology, enrollment, and museum cataloguing and display are linked together as concrete examples of how Indians have been and are racialized. Careful historical context is provided on each panel, supplemented by documentation of the specific practices under scrutiny. But also included are Native responses that reflect sadness and anger, and Indian humor that satirizes colonial classification schemes including those of museums.

For instance, in a 1993 installation at the San Francisco Art Institute entitled *Nobody’s Pet Indian*, Diné/Seminole/Muscogee multimedia artist Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie included three replicated 40 × 30-inch photographed self-portraits, using adhesives to print her BIA-issued enrollment number and bar codes across her face. Though they conspicuously omit which tribe she is enrolled with, or which enrollment criteria she “satisfies,” the numbers identify her as meeting the enrollment criteria of at least one of the tribes from which she is “mixed.” (The point, of course, is that these numbers *are not* who she *is*.) Still more provocatively, Tsinhnahjinnie collates her enrollment numbers with bar codes to call attention to the commodification of Indian people in the Indian Arts and Crafts Act’s promise to render Indian art “authentic.” For instead of giving her the freedom to represent herself, the

numbers and codes gag, label, and market her as “authentic,” the very sort of Indian she is interrogating. Her work shows how the act—which provides that only enrolled members of federally recognized tribes can sell or display their work as “Indian”—constricts her, insuring that her work will be read from within federal definitions of Indianness. Thus the act reinforces her status as a specimen and testifies to the United States’ authority to name her. With Indian identity as the true commodity of Indian art, federal authority is invested in trafficking in its own commodified Indian as the truly authentic one.¹⁰

In *The Artifact Piece* (1987), Luiseño multimedia artist James Luna places himself inside a museum display box, labeling and documenting his various scars as *evidence* of “excessive drinking.” First presented in 1987 as part of the Kumeyaay exhibits at the Museum and Man in San Diego, California, the living, breathing Luna remained on display for several days, calling attention to the dehumanizing, racializing objectification of Indian peoples within Euro-American museums.¹¹ Those who visited realized quickly that he was listening and even watching them as they walked by and talked about him—satirizing and disrupting the traditional voyeuristic relationships that are so much a part of the history of the display of Indian peoples and artifacts within museums.¹³

The works of Tsinhnahjinnie and Luna are delightfully complex responses to the colonial and racist histories of federal and scientific identifications of Indians. Both critique these histories in smart and playful ways, reclaiming for themselves as Indian artists the power of self-definition and representation against those still looking for *the* Indian in Indian art and Indian museums. It is not coincidental that both question the intellectual and ethical responsibilities of museums and museum visitors, calling attention to their complicity in histories of colonialism and racism. It is as if they both challenge: Label me, display me, view me, but remember that I am human, and I am representing back, and you may not like what you see about yourself. In this way, both artists insist that visitors take responsibility for critical self-reflection when they set out to know about Indians.

The middle-aged couple Dumont spoke with about the installation had a very different reaction. They were not engaged by the contested histories or by the personal challenges issued by Indian people in “Body and Soul.” Instead, they dismissed the entire installation as confused and ahistorical.

This is a confusing exhibit. Because there is no real starting point and it doesn't show any chronological history. It's confusing to come in and see how isolated all of this is. It's just current groups. This is not what we expected, because we popped into the current. Where, we were coming in, say, I was thinking okay the last ice age. How did things evolve? Where were the nations you know all the way down and then, at some point, contact with the Europeans . . . and how things changed from that.¹²

Later, after completing their tour of NMAI, they told Dumont that they went to the museum to “learn important things: historical things, serious issues,

sensitive issues, issues that may open old wounds.” While admitting, “we never found what we were looking for,” they still managed to force their encounters with the museum into the narrative they still believed the museum should have confirmed: “It [the museum] is another tragedy in a long history of tragedies,” although, they regret, “our kids didn’t get a sense of that.”

Indeed NMAI staff, Native and not, noted visitors’ frustrations with the lack of more familiar historical narrations. NMAI’s lead cultural interpreter, an articulate, young Native man told Dumont that he regularly encounters those who want “people of the past.” “We hope they leave knowing,” he said, that “we are people of the present.” When pressed, he recounted in a slightly amused tone,

A lot of people come in and they want to hear all the atrocities. They want to see all the massacres and see all the blood. . . . But, the communities themselves don’t necessarily want to focus on that. They want to focus on how they were able to survive. And so, we hope that people leave with that message.

One visitor heard this loud and clear. A thoughtful and initially confused man of about thirty, who identified himself to be of Irish heritage, admitted to wanting the old, familiar narratives and enjoying his surprise at the presentations he viewed. Dumont caught up with him as he rested with his family in a small lounge at one end of the floor in the Our Peoples gallery.

I would expect the classical museum stuff about pre-European Indians and things like that. I do hope some of that is here because that is more what I was originally interested in. But it is very cool to see the adaptability and what they are trying to do to maintain culture and fit in. I mean I think this is something that every American does. . . . I definitely learned a lot about the modern Native American.

In fact, *there are* many historical moments in the walk through the NMAI. The museum goes to great lengths to exhibit Native perspectives on the history of intercultural contact. Yet, when these encounters are recalled, neither the perspectives nor the histories conform to conventional museum metanarratives about Indian people. Indeed the very layout of the galleries organizes the disruption of more comfortable narratives that inform the expectations that many visitors bring to the museum.

The three exhibitions, *Our Universe*, *Our Peoples*, and *Our Lives*, include a “center” space focusing on the related beliefs (cosmologies) and shared experiences (colonialism) of Native peoples. This grounding is contradistinguished by installations addressing the specificities of those beliefs and experiences from the unique histories, cultures, identities, and perspectives of individual tribes and tribal peoples.

For example, the *Our Peoples* gallery includes installations entitled: *Making History* (a video presentation), “1491” (clay objects), “Gold” (metal objects), “Fire” (about the Spanish Catholic’s destruction of Mayan texts),

“Coiled Dragons” (guns), “Invasions” (about epidemics), “Stated Intentions” (broken treaties), and a display case of translated bibles. In each installation, overlaid text, computer-generated booklets, and manuals describe, in rather traditional museum fashion, objects and artists. But the descriptions are not easy. Rather, they suggest that the significance of the displayed objects is not so obvious. Meanings and interpretations shift with time, politics, and cultural interactions.

In “1491,” “Gold,” and “Coiled Dragons,” objects transform through time from cultural uses and jewelry into melted and reformed currency and weapons. These transformations both suggest and unsettle the classic contact narrative leading from Native purity and integrity to cultural contamination and destruction. It is not that the traditional narrative is “wrong”; it is just that it is too simple. We are shown that Native peoples used and reinterpreted these objects in ways that do not fit the familiar, tragic tales of “the Indian.”

In “Invasions,” “Fire,” and on the wall of translated bibles, the church is indelibly connected to the military and disease as an instrument of cultural and physical genocide. “Fire” specifically indicts the colonial arrogance of the Spanish church as it presumed the authority to destroy written Native histories and rewrite them without Native perspectives. But even as the church is attacked as an agent of destruction, we are confronted with a reminder that “today the majority of Native people call themselves Christian.”

On the wall of translated bibles, we read that there are one hundred bibles displayed in seventy-five Native languages. A caption explains that the US government once criminalized Native religious practices and incarcerated religious leaders. Titled, “INDIAN Religious CRIMES,” an 1891 order of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs is quoted:

Any Indian who shall engage in the practices of so-called medicine men, or who shall resort to any artifice or device to keep the Indians of the reservation from adopting and following civilized habits and pursuits, or shall adopt any means to prevent the attendance of children at school, or shall use any arts of a conjurer to prevent Indians from abandoning their barbarous rites and customs, shall be deemed to be guilty of an offense.

Nearby text explains of the boarding school era that “the schools promoted Christian values and beliefs and prohibited students from speaking their Native languages.” But this is followed by, “Some tribes were able to use skills learned at boarding schools to build unity.” Our Peoples refuses the comforts of easy judgments and tidy finalities. It does not permit visitors to duck the fundamental responsibility of their own interpretive work, provoking them to question their assumptions about Native history.

In between the wall of translated bibles and “Coiled Dragons” is a small, semi-enclosed space with small video screens continuously running a short film called *The Storm*. The narrator, over images of a hurricane crashing along the Atlantic seaboard and tearing apart homes and cars in its wake, tells us that the storm is a metaphor for the impact of guns and Christianity on Indian culture



FIGURE 2. The Storm in the Our Peoples gallery. Photo by Melissa Nelson (Chippewa).

and identity. However, instead of being merely the instruments of destruction, guns and Christianity also define what it means to be Indian: “For what is more Indian than the Winchester?” Christianity, too, the narrator says, is both a weapon of oppression and liberation. So while the storm destroys and brings death and despair to those whose lives it literally and violently transforms, it is also a source of life, hope, and an opportunity to learn (see fig. 2).

The intent of *The Storm* is to complicate notions of cultural exchange and change during colonization. With specific reference to guns, horses, and Christianity, *The Storm* wants to show how Indian people transformed the tools of colonialism into the instruments of integration, empowerment, and even liberation. Thus, while we are constantly confronted with the realities of genocide by war and disease, the destruction of Indian historical archives, and forced assimilation, we are also told about how Indians incorporated the beliefs and tools of colonialism into their very means of survival.

However, *The Storm* is troubled. While we are being told about the realities of cultural exchange, we are watching the total destruction of urban areas by a devastating hurricane. While we are told about the liberation that Christianity offered to Indians, we are looking at the horrible impact of a hurricane that has all but wiped away all that it touched. Quite appropriately, these messages defy reconciliation. Once again, the NMAI is refusing to consort or pander to those who covet the comfort of master narratives and desire only what they can quickly assimilate. Yes, there was destruction, but there was also transformation. And transformation isn’t always tragic or horrid.

At the end of the wall of translated bibles, shadowed by the guns, is the word *survivance*. It is a term created by Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* and it is peppered throughout the NMAI to celebrate, trouble, and remember the cultural survival of Indian peoples despite ongoing histories of colonialism and racism. The text under *survivance* reads:

In every case, Native people faced a contest for power and possessions that involved three forces—guns, churches, and governments. These forces shaped the lives of Indians who survived the massive rupture of the first century of Contact. By adopting the very tools that were used to change, control, and dispossess them, Native peoples reshaped their cultures and societies to keep them alive. This strategy has been called *survivance*.

If the NMAI has a “thesis” or “message,” this would seem to be it: Indian peoples have survived despite and because of their experiences of colonialism and racism. Their unique cosmologies, beliefs, and practices remain important though certainly changed within their contemporary lives.

Despite the rich interpretive and historical contexts provided in these Indian-told stories about *survivance*, nostalgia-driven critics of the NMAI continue to multiply.¹⁴ Rothstein, writing for the *New York Times*, openly laments the loss of anthropological authority at the NMAI. Preferring the Indians of the National Museum of Natural History, who are depicted as objective, physical evidence of an evolutionary history of mankind, Rothstein finds the multiple perspectives represented at the NMAI to lack coherence. He concludes that “no unified intelligence has been applied” to the NMAI’s exhibits and that this “studious avoidance of scholarship” amounts to a “self-celebratory romance.”¹⁵ The Santa Clara Pueblo are said to be a particularly egregious example of these intellectually soft Native self-representations:

The display for the Santa Clara Pueblo of New Mexico, for example, explains: “We are made up of two major clans, Summer and Winter people.” But, the Pueblo curator writes: “There is no dividing line. There is just a sense.”¹⁶

Why is Rothstein so outraged? Obviously he wants to know about Indians; and he seems, at least in principle, to support the idea that Indians can do the teaching. (He is careful to point out that the anthropologist in charge of the National Museum of Natural History’s program is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux.) Thus Rothstein’s disgruntlement must be about his loss of cultural authority, of epistemological power? Apparently, the Pueblo could care less about how their lack of strict, familial demarcation and definitive boundary making will be understood, or not, by “scholars” such as Rothstein. Perhaps that is the real rub. His authority is being challenged and he does not like it. Here, in this Native space, he who is so accustomed to his privilege must struggle with ways that are not his own.

Fisher, of the *Washington Post*, is still more blunt about authorial power and who should wield it. The Smithsonian, he scolds, “accepted the trendy faux-selflessness of today’s historians and let the Indians present themselves as they wish to be seen.”¹⁷ Fisher does not want to hear about Indians from the perspectives of Indians, period. Never mind that the title of the facility is the National Museum of the American Indian or that Indian peoples are sovereign nations with rights to self-determination. For Fisher the mandate of a *national* museum ought to be *the* celebrated multicultural unification of America, even for Indians who predate America. The museum instead, he says:

adds to the balkanization of a society that seems ever more ashamed of the unity and purpose that sustained it over two centuries. . . . 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.¹⁸

“Unity and purpose that sustained it over two centuries”? If Fisher actually believes this, then no single individual could be more seriously in need of the many lessons taught by the museum. And it may be that he is so unconditionally wed to his preferred patriotic story of a multicultural America that he refuses or is unwilling to hear competing Native accounts. But even as we think it exceedingly arrogant for Fisher to presume that Native self-representations should be forced into a “synthesizing” aimed at “clearing a path toward a more perfect union,” we also recognize this self-absorption to be the single biggest impediment to genuine progress toward healthy, intercultural relationships. This is sadly and ironically familiar. It is, after all, just this sort of ethnocentric myopia that led in part to the museum’s sense of mission and unusual design. Taken seriously, as a space requiring serious contemplation and self-interrogation—and not as a place that one wishes was a consumer land of familiar and reassuring non-Indian stereotypes about Indians—the NMAI does indeed provide “the tools” needed by “new generations of Americans” who want to know Indian peoples as equals and in a relationship of mutual respect.

Other reviews are sadly similar. Always it seems, these critics know who Indians are; and they are upset because the Indians of the NMAI refuse to participate in their preferred narratives. Richard, writing for the *Washington Post*, asks: “Are ancient painted bowls made before the white man came and those thrown for the gift shop equally authentic?” Faced with a facility full of contemporary, historical, and purposefully varied claims to Indian culture and identity, Richard is unable to burden himself with considering why and how questions about “authenticity” are repeatedly interrogated within the exhibits. Instead, he retreats into his own, tired assumptions and proclaims that the museum provides “next to nothing useful about the Indian past.”¹⁹

On other occasions, one wonders why these critics are given space in such venerable publications? Writing for *Slate*, Noah admits, “you couldn’t fill a thimble with my more general knowledge of Native American culture and history.”²⁰ Yet, he is perfectly willing to attack the NMAI for not giving

him the quick, easily accessible answers that modern American consumers routinely expect:

museums are supposed to impart knowledge. They're supposed to grab you by the lapel and say, *Here is something you must see, and here is why it is important.*²¹

Repeating the charge we have already heard from other visitors and critics, that “the disciplines necessary to understand these cultures include art, history, and anthropology,” Noah then makes an ignominious attempt to grapple with the concept of survivance.

Yes, many beliefs and practices of these tribal cultures survive to this day. But it's absurd to suggest that, even with recent improvements in tribal economies—many of them achieved without building casinos—Native Americans live the same way in the 21st century as they did in the 16th.²²

Frankly, we find it difficult to believe that Noah spent *any* time reflecting on what he saw in the museum. We hope he has actually been there. To draw the conclusion, from seeing contemporary Native peoples in the same spaces as Native-told histories, that the NMAI is asserting that Indian cultures have remained stagnant is baffling. To use such a ridiculous reading as an opportunity to slam Indian gaming is to foment the prejudice that we hope the museum will help its more thoughtful viewers to learn to confront. Indeed, one staff member with whom Dumont spoke offers a more optimistic outlook. The non-Native woman remarked, “I think most people were expecting to have more historical exhibits.” Then, apparently realizing the inconsistency of the statement with what she knows to be the large historical content of NMAI, she corrected herself. “But, I think it will just take them awhile to get adjusted to a different kind of an exhibit and understand.”

This seems exactly right. Given the large and incredibly nuanced historical content of the NMAI, some of which we have recounted here, the issue cannot be one of historical *omission*. Some visitors and some reviewers are frustrated because they don't recognize the content or perspectives in the histories that *are* presented. Adroitly, the museum has anticipated this and gone to great lengths to engage these frustrations. However, it is far from clear that visitors and reviewers are willing to hold up their end of the bargain. Rothstein, Fisher, Richard, and Noah conclude that the museum fails to provide an adequate history or education. We suspect they put forth little effort. Noah even declares proudly that the available information requires too much work to obtain:

If an item described on one of the touch screen menus sounds intriguing, I can, in theory, look up at the display case and find it. But to locate one item, *Where's Waldo?*-style, inside the crowded panorama is too much like helping my eight year old find the socks she tossed onto the floor or the jacket she forgot to hang up. No thank you.²³

THE EVIDENCE OF HISTORY: POWER IN ALCHEMY

A wall partition interrupts the smooth entrance into Our Peoples. It is thick, opaque, barely transparent glass. Etched into the glass in large, gray, embossed letters is the word *evidence*. Objects are enclosed within the glass. They are visible, but not really. You have to look hard to see them. We think we can make out a bow and arrows, maybe a pipe or a powder horn. It is difficult to tell exactly, but they are there—the evidence is there.

Dumont stood for thirty minutes watching throngs of visitors pass this point. None of them paused. No one contemplated. Few even looked twice. The perfect metaphor we think. All of these people who want *their* ideas about Indians validated and at the same time are unwilling to grapple with that desire. As the wall appears to be trying to suggest, they may want quick, clear answers, but there are none to be had.

On a panel just to the left, in varying-sized letters, is text that reads, “We are the evidence of this western hemisphere.” It is another apparently rarely engaged piece of text. Subsequent text explains that the Our Peoples gallery aims to “reveal how Indians have struggled to survive and explain why so little of this history is familiar.” A claim is being made. We *are* the evidence. And we are not so quickly known or possessed (documented, charted, displayed) by those who have always twisted us into their own stories for their own purposes (academic, religious, military). “We are” is written larger than “the” but not as large as “evidence.” There is, after all, much evidence of many kinds. There are many competing stories awarding it significance and doing so in the making—alchemy—of many conflicting, competing points of argument.

The contest, then, is over the territory of this word: *evidence*. What has it meant? For whom and upon whom has it been made to work? Who has enjoyed the power to decide what constitutes evidence? Which narratives has it been made to support and sustain and for what (whose) purposes? Certainly Indian peoples have been way too much “evidence” for way too many non-Native renderings for far too long.

The wall claims and rearticulates this long oppressive word. (Other racialized and sexualized groups have used this strategy to great success.²⁴) What then can Indians do with this word to reshape it into a useful and strategically deployed piece of their own stories? (Dumont can almost see cousins and friends pointing playfully at one another and saying: “evidence... ayhh.”)

Again, the first issue seems to be ownership. We *are* the evidence and we will speak for ourselves, right here, right now. In this museum, we tell the stories. *Your* “evidence” is in here and is now talking back to you. But while Our Peoples are the stories told here, this does not mean that we claim to be *the* story, the only narration, *the* evidence. Indeed, this museum understands the arrogant folly of those claims and celebrates its own interpretive vulnerabilities. It makes it possible to say: How dare non-Indians claim us, we who *are* evidence, as *their* evidence, for their own interpretive needs. Why do they feel it is their place to be frustrated and even angry because their stories do not greet them in what is after all a Native space?

Just past the wall of evidence is an enclosed installation entitled *Making History*. George Catlan portraits, images that have proven so potent in the

production of American Indian identity in this country, are interspersed with small, rectangular video screens where a Native man narrates:

The exhibit that surrounds you now examines the alchemy that changes the past into stories. . . . We're viewed as saviors of the environment, barbarians and noble savages . . . sometimes all at once. . . . It's a dizzying spectrum of impressions, deeply embedded, fiercely held, hard to dislodge. They've been fixed in all our minds by histories taught in classrooms generation after generation. Hollywood has offered its image of us, a powerful one forged and reinforced by movies seen by countless viewers. The subjects here—us—have been portrayed from the outside. Our stories told by others to explain or justify their own agendas. Or we've been considered people without a history. The truth is we care passionately and have fought at great cost to reclaim knowledge of the past. We are left then with this paradox: for all our visibility, we have been rendered invisible and silent. A history-loving people stripped of their own history. This museum rests on the foundation of consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Natives. We've shared the power museum's usually keep. The place you stand in is the end product of that sharing, a process giving voice. This gallery is making history. And like all other makers of history, it has a point of view—an agenda. . . . What is said and what you see may fly in the face of much of what you've learned. . . . Here, we have done as others have done, turning events into history. So, view what's offered with respect. But also skepticism. Explore this gallery. Encounter it. Reflect on it. Argue with it.

Here is an invitation to think, interrogate, and confound one's assumptions in ways that museums have not traditionally strived for or even allowed. Indeed, Dumont has long since avoided other museums' depictions of Indians for exactly this reason. Far from assuming a competitive role in some academic race to say who Native peoples "really are," the NMAI actively challenges that whole epistemological enterprise. This museum may be a lesson, but it is not a lecture. Knowledge, in these walls, is not claimed, owned, and meted out to those who are privileged enough to hear the credentialed expound. These presentations are similar to offers to converse. There is little of the familiar arrogance that almost always goes with claims to be the true and authentic. Precisely because there are lots of stories, conflicting statements, and unique self-presentations from very different nations and individuals, a comforting sense of humility hangs in the air.

In another of his short interviews, Dumont found two visitors who seemed to be in very different but nonetheless engaged conversations with an exhibit. In the Kahnawake (Québec, Canada) tribal installation in *Our Lives*, he found the women gazing at a video presentation entitled, "We're Not All Cut from the Same Mold." One appeared to be in her late thirties and the other was probably in her early fifties. They had just finished listening to a Mohawk fireman explain that he "was born in the United States, in Brooklyn, New

York.” He went on to say that “therefore the American government considers me an American citizen.” Another Mohawk man then said, “I’m North American Indian; I’m not Canadian; I’m not an American.” This visibly upset the elder woman. Dumont’s reading of her face was that she was disgusted. He approached and asked for her thoughts.

Well, I had a problem, only because, you know, I wasn’t born here. My relatives weren’t born here. I’m American as far as I’m concerned. You still have your heritage no matter what; but, you know, I just have a real problem with that, not feeling a part of whatever country that you are from. I think that guy said “I was born in Brooklyn, New York but I don’t consider myself part of this country.” And I don’t appreciate that. I have no problem appreciating other cultures. There are a lot of other cultures. There is still one thing that makes this country what it is, uniting everybody together because we are all so different.

This is an intriguing response. On the one hand, this woman has been shaken by these Native men’s insistence on their traditional identities (citizenships) as Mohawk. Real, although technologically mediated, Natives have confronted her and they are saying unexpected things. These Indians are not part of any familiar story, nor is she allowed one-way gazing upon familiar art objects that might then be incorporated into narratives that she finds less troubling. The “Native art” and “beads” that she made a point of acknowledging her admiration for, although present in the same museum, have now become attached to modern Native men in firemen’s dress who appear disrespectful of her nation.²⁵ Indeed, this woman closed our conversation by noting that she “has to work with” (a particular nonindigenous American minority group) “all the time.” So she seemed to incorporate at least this part of the NMAI into some sort of “disgruntled and unappreciative minorities” narrative that she brought to the museum and now invoked as needed. This fits with her claim “that what makes this country what it is” is “uniting everybody together” despite the fact that “we are all so different.”

Hearing her friend’s remarks, the second woman offered a more engaged response.

I can see how they feel that they’re from there, wherever that is and whatever their background was, and not aligned with borders. It’s westerners that look at borders and define everything with borders. In their culture they don’t have to define everything with states and borders.

Although not yet fully developed, the second woman’s comments show movement of thought, perhaps as a direct result of her encounter with this presentation. She understands that culture includes perceptions of land and territory and that identity is tied to these perceptions. She even recognizes that borders and states are cultural concepts, thus disrupting her friend’s assumption that the nation-state (“this country”) is an extrapolitical object that ought to function as an uncontested site of foundational identity (“uniting every-

body together”). Unlike her companion, she gets that “appreciating other cultures” means one’s own culture does not get complete dominion over what counts as culture (“beads” and “Native art”).

Although we did not get to be present for their car ride home, we can indulge ourselves with a fantasy of how the conversation might have gone. Certainly it is not far from recognizing that “borders” have always been understood in different ways by different cultures to realizing that these boundaries are therefore born and maintained through conflict. Is it even possible that “all the atrocities” of the past—those that the young Native cultural interpreter lamented visitors seem so eager to revisit—might get shaken loose from their politically innocuous status? Might they be provoked into rethinking these culturally banal stories that are everyday invoked by present generations as a means of self-congratulations, marking their moral advancement beyond earlier generations of Euro-Americans? Maybe these women were forced into a conversation about the *ongoing, present* consequences of “all the blood”? Although probably too much to hope for, imagine if the first woman could be pushed into critical conversation with her comment: “You still have your heritage no matter what.” Would she see that reclaiming Native identity is a defense of heritage and that this reclamation is only necessary now precisely because of the long sordid history of American nationalism (militarism) that she insists we all must embrace? At the least, we can hope that she realized she was surrounded by stories of “survance” and that these accounts gave her some pause, some context for recognizing that Native peoples absolutely do not simply “have [our] heritage no matter what.”

THE RETURN OF THE RECOGNIZED

The unanticipated sense of pride in “Who We Are,” the empowering invitation for critical engagement in *Our Peoples*, and many other interactions with the individual displays, colleagues, and other visitors reoriented Barker’s concerns about the museum’s responsibilities to the politics of recognition. The entrance into the *Our Lives* gallery encapsulated this reorientation.

The entryway is a somewhat narrow corridor framed by life-size screens. Onto the screens, images of many different kinds of people walking into the *Our Lives* gallery are projected: old, young, casual, uniformed, dark, light, alone, in groups. Simultaneously, everyone physically entering is reflected onto the screens so that everyone—the projected images, those physically entering, oneself—enter together. At the end of the corridor is a small panel on the right wall that reads: “Anywhere in the Americas, you could be walking with a 21st-century Native American.”

Barker had a strong emotional response to the experience of walking in with many different kinds of people and being told that any one of them—any one of *us*—could be Native. While her responses to that point in the museum had made her feel proud and connected and frustrated, she had not felt necessarily included or implicated. She had maintained a relative distance. But suddenly she was recognized. Called out. An Indian without the look, the appearance. *Like so many Indians*. She found herself relieved and proud

of the NMAI's direct confrontation of the stereotyping of Indian bodies and appearances—so much a part of the history of art and photographic images of and by Indians displayed in museums throughout the world (including the NMAI's companion Smithsonian along the Capitol Mall).

Dumont's reaction to the corridor was equally appreciative. A few months earlier, he had attended the opening of the museum with his younger brother, Shawn Dumont. Shawn wears long braids, has an earring made from a bear's claw, and carries a beaded tobacco pouch. Dumont, the older brother, has short hair and wears clothing that mark him as Native only on solemn or special occasions. Their father and his twin brother make similarly different choices about their appearances. Although the family understands that Indianness is not contained in these choices, non-Natives who know few Indians are rarely as discerning. Traveling across the country to be at the opening, the Dumont brothers repeatedly encountered tourists who asked to be photographed with Shawn.

Arriving in Washington DC, the brothers saw more Indians in one place than they had imagined possible. We weren't alone in our bewilderment. Tribal elders we met there told us they had never seen so many Natives either, and one eighty-year-old Tlingit woman surmised that we "would never again see so many in one place." The diversity among us was astonishing and empowering. For Dumont, the NMAI's "Who We Are" is forever linked to what he and his brother saw on that amazing day in September 2004.

The diversity of Native peoples represented in the corridor confronts those who so often casually assume that they have the right and expertise to pronounce who is and is not "Indian" based on physical assessments. These assessments are often meted out in causal moments of ethnic sizing up, and complicated further by assumptions about what counts for cultural authenticity, such as dress and hair length. But in its emphasis on the contemporary experiences of Indians, *Our Lives* calls attention to the futility of these assumptions. You can't get into *Our Lives* without knowing that these popular marks of authenticity are unreliable evidence for determining Indian identity. If "anywhere in the Americas," you as a non-Native, "could be walking with a 21st-century Native American," and you want to know *who* Native peoples *are*, then you're going to have to look for different kinds of "evidence" to tell you. But the troubles don't stop for non-Natives.

So many Native self-representations, particularly portraits, have erased the diversity of Native identities and cultures. The recognition and critique of these representations within the quick space of the corridor into *Our Lives* is both brilliant and blunt. It is carried through in the first display, entitled "Fully Native." "Fully Native" begins with text that questions presumptions about Native identity. The text is contained within a wall of large photographic stills of Native faces as equally diverse and telling as those in the corridor. A floor-to-ceiling-length monitor is located within the stills. Onto it is projected a continuously running portrait that morphs into purposefully varied Native faces—from more "traditional-looking" Indians to modern Native faces such as those captured in the stills and within the corridor. The sheer diversity of Native peoples—their humanity, cultures,

identities, families and communities, experiences, work, and affiliations—is presented as a matter of fact.

The images in the entryway and “Fully Native” pull visitors into the center of Our Lives and the fierce set of critiques and humorous satires of federal identifications and scientific evaluations of Indian identity in “Body and Soul.” This is reinforced and complicated by the individual tribal installations, including the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians in California; the urban Indian community of Chicago, Illinois; the Yakama Nation of Washington; the Igloodik of Nunavut, Canada; the Kahnawake of Quebec, Canada; the Saint-Laurent Métis of Manitoba, Canada; the Kalinago in Carib Territory, Dominica; and the Pamunkey Tribe of Virginia. Each installation includes mixed media, traditional, and contemporary materials and objects, and the perspectives of many different individual tribal people. These emphasize the diversity of their respective communities and the hard choices for self-determination that tribal peoples confront in today’s world.

Barker enjoyed walking through the Our Lives gallery, having had her concerns about the politics of recognition reorientated by “Who We Are” and the many exhibits. But then, she entered the final tribal installation in Our Lives: The Pamunkey Tribe of Virginia.

There, a small group of Indians entered behind her. A woman, about her age she guessed, took a deep breath and said to her relatives with an obvious sense of profound disappointment, “The only local tribe they include is the Pamunkey. And they’re from *Virginia*. What about *us*?” Barker turned and asked what nation she was from but the woman didn’t hear her. By then the woman and her relatives were gathered together in a tight circle, talking in low voices. Barker didn’t want to be rude and eavesdrop, or interrupt, so she moved through the small display and then out through the neighboring exit of the gallery. However, their protests stayed with her.

The District of Columbia was created out of the states of Virginia and Maryland in 1790. Originally, the territory belonged to the Piscataway. The Piscataway and Delaware speak an Algonquin language. In fact, the word *mitsitam*, which is the name of the NMAI’s café, means *let’s eat* to both the Piscataway and the Delaware. Along with neighboring Algonquin tribes, they have a matrilineal society and history of intertribal political relations, trade, and cultural exchange predating and surviving colonization of the region by the English and the United States. Today, there are four tribes of Piscataway: the Piscataway Indian Nation (led by Billy Tayac), the Maryland Indian Heritage Society (headed by Hugh Proctor), the Piscataway Conoy Confederacy and Subtribes (chaired by Mervin Savoy), and the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians (chaired by Natalie Proctor). None are federally recognized.²⁶ The Cedarville Band operates an active, vital museum, cultural center, and trading post twenty miles south of DC, in Waldorf, Maryland.²⁷

The small group walking through the Pamunkey display, which Barker assumed were Piscataway, renewed her concerns about the NMAI’s responsibilities to the politics of *Indian* recognition and all the ambivalence contained in the museum’s promise for tribal consultation and collaboration. Did the woman’s remarks imply that the Piscataway or the directors of their cultural

museum were not consulted by the NMAI? If not, is it because they are unrecognized? Will unrecognized tribes be invited to curate one of the individual tribal installations at the museum? What sense of responsibility does the NMAI have to unrecognized tribes and their exclusions from the provisions of federal statutes such as the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990), the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), and the Federally Recognized Tribes List Act (1994)? How did the status of the NMAI as a federal and national museum inform its address to these various constituencies and issues? Uncomfortably, Barker remembered that none of these issues had been adequately addressed within the museum, the exception being Tsinhnahjinnie's brief response to the Indian Arts and Crafts Act.

Opposite the "We are the evidence" wall (see fig. 3) at the exit to the Our Peoples gallery is a display entitled "Stated Intentions." Included are documents indicating the history of how tribal rights to sovereignty have been undermined by the United States. The documents include an original, signed copy of the Treaty of Fort Harmar of 1789, which was entered into by the United States and the Wyandot, Delaware, Ottawa, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Sauk nations, all of whom were then in Ohio. Adjacent text explains the change in United States treaty policy: from negotiating with single Indian nations to negotiating with clusters of tribes as a means of expediting removal. Also included is a brief description of the Marshall Trilogy (the US Supreme Court decisions in *Johnson v. McIntosh* of 1823, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* of 1831, and *Worcester v. Georgia* of 1832). Text explains how the US Supreme Court defines Indian sovereignty in terms of dependence on the United States for the recognition and protection of Native rights to self-government and territorial integrity. Poignantly, "We are the evidence" is reflected on the glass of the display case, providing a visual reminder of Native survivance despite their removals and erasures by federal policy.

Standing in between the wall of evidence and the broken treaties, for the first time Barker looked for the Delaware among the profound, moving, complicated, and troubled histories of genocide, assimilation, and survival included within Our Peoples. They are named, as one of the signatories of the 1789 treaty and their language is used to name the museum's café and theater. But Barker turned back to the list of tribes boldly serving as evidence of the survival of Native Americans in the Western Hemisphere. She didn't want to look for the Delaware; she didn't want to notice their absence.

Later that day she reviewed the wall with Melissa Nelson (Chippewa), a colleague from San Francisco State University with whom she had traveled to DC and with whom she had spent much time walking through the museum. Nelson likewise did not see the Delaware (or the Lenape), though we found and recorded on video all of the other tribes represented by our small research group: Ojibwe/Chippewa/Anishinabe, Klamath, Umpqua, and Ho-Chunk. Barker discussed her ambivalence with Nelson in looking for the Delaware: Am I being ethno-tribal centric? Is it too much to expect their inclusion, an affirmation of their status beyond the display of broken treaties? In talking with Dumont later, she realized that all of us had been guilty of the same. Dumont likewise had found some satisfaction in finding that the



FIGURE 3. “We Are the Evidence” wall in the Our Peoples gallery. Photo by Melissa Nelson (Chippewa).

Umpqua had sponsored the research room.

CONCLUSION

As Dumont sat outside a secondary, not-so-well-traveled entrance into the museum, the young Native cultural interpreter and an older, Native employee of the NMAI approached him. “So, what did you think?” After expressing his appreciation and pride for a job well done, Dumont asked for a story about a “failure” of the museum. The younger man thought for a moment and responded:

Well, a few weeks after opening day we started doing tours for children. . . . And one of the first groups that came through the museum were a group of kindergarten students, a local school. And they were all in line at the south entrance of the museum wearing paper cut-out headdresses . . . with pink and blue and white feathers. . . . And so I approached the teacher and informed her that that wasn’t cool, and that we were trying to do something different here. . . . She didn’t take it very well. She instructed her students to remove their headdresses and put them in their bags. . . . As they left the museum . . . they put them back on.

As this story all too keenly illustrates, being Native has never been easy. The NMAI may not change this anytime soon, but it has certainly shifted the conversation, marking a shift in the current terrain of representation and narrative within and between Native peoples and non-Natives. The museum is a Native place or, better said, a place filled with Native places; and the stories told there are unabashedly complex: disjointed, overlapping, competing and conflicting, emotional, celebratory, scathing, humorous, reverent, beautiful, and depressing. As our new museum tells its many stories, it confronts ignorance and assumption on multiple levels. It provokes and cajoles as it teaches. Reviewers and visitors in the habit of routinely and wrongly assuming that they know who Indians are report confusion, disorientation, frustration, and at times even anger about what they find—and don't find—at the NMAI. Owing to the diversity of its audiences and their desires, conflicts over its reception will not dry up any time soon. Clearly, every researcher, artist, tourist, and Native—sometimes all the same person—is going to measure its impact differently and from their own unique, constantly evolving perspectives.

We see the NMAI as a space created in deeply admirable, almost manic self-reflection. Although far from perfect—and neither of us believe in this particular theology—the museum is wildly successful in its intent to provoke both heady and emotional dialogue. It embraces and never tries to hide from ongoing, always unfinished histories, cultures, identities, meanings, knowledge claims, and social relationships. These contested conversations are the permanent feature of cross-cultural exchange that Natives and non-Natives share a responsibility for working out, albeit always only momentarily and modestly. The museum cannot force its visitors into difficult self-reflections, but it can and does refuse to facilitate complacency. Unapologetically, these difficult conversations are how the NMAI will continue to instigate its own reception as a “Native space.”

NOTES

1. The Delaware name for themselves is Lenni-Lenape; *len* means “common” and *âpé* means “people.” The word *Lenâpé* standing alone can be translated as “common people” and the addition of *Lenni* is a redundancy that reinforces the signification: Common People. Barker chose to use Delaware here because that is the name by which they are (un)recognized by the United States and the Cherokee as a tribe.

2. A reference to the conclusion of the *Making History* video (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2004).

3. For analysis of the impact of racism on US federal Indian policy, see Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (New York: New American Library, 1980); Brain W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and United States Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Robert A. Williams Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Bethany Ruth Berger, “After Pocahontas: Indian Women and the Law, 1830–1934,” *American Indian Law Review* 21, no. 1 (1997): 1–62; David Wilkins

and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

4. The act requires that the BIA “publish in the Federal Register a list of all Indian tribes which the Secretary recognizes to be eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians” (since amended to include Alaskan Natives and Native Hawaiians). The act says that tribes may be recognized “by an act of Congress; by the administrative procedures set forth in Part 83 of the Code of Federal Regulations denominated ‘Procedures for Establishing that an American Indian Group Exists as an Indian Tribe’ [the FAP]; or by a decision of a United States court.” Tribes that are recognized are to be placed on the list by the BIA, “used by various departments and agencies of the United States to determine the eligibility of certain groups to receive services from the United States.” These services include qualifications for housing and business loans, health care funding through the Indian Health Service, and education grants. Inclusion on the list also requires federal consultation with tribal representatives under Executive Order (EO) #13175, implicating everything from involvement in conservation projects, the management of an emergency, the programs of the Federal Highway Administration, and the implementation of relevant legislation, such as the National Parks Service oversight responsibilities with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. According to the 1994 act, tribes who lose their recognition status by congressional act or court decision are to be removed from the list, and so are removed from all services and consultation procedures required by the law.

5. See Claudia Haake, “Identity, Sovereignty, Power: The Cherokee-Delaware Agreement of 1867, Past and Present,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 418–35.

6. A case in point, our own university currently cares for more than 220 deceased Ohlone, a non-federally recognized tribe whose traditional lands are within the San Francisco Bay Area. Although we remain confident that they will go back to their closest living descendants, the Ohlone’s lack of federal recognition complicates this process in multiple ways. See Philip Laverty, “The Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation of Monterey, California: Dispossession, Federal Neglect, and the Bitter Irony of the Federal Acknowledgement Process,” *Wicazō Ša Review: A Native American Studies Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 41–78; Les W. Field with the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, “Unacknowledged Tribes, Dangerous Knowledge: The Muwukma Ohlone and How Indian Identities are ‘Known,’” *Wicazō Ša Review: A Native American Studies Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 95–126.

7. In many instances a lack of federal recognition has a positive correlation with the effectiveness of the nineteenth-century genocide campaigns waged against tribes in specific geographical areas. For example, for federally unrecognized tribes in northern California, California statehood, the Gold Rush, and the onslaught of European immigration that followed was a time of utter devastation. See Laverty, “The Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation of Monterey, California”; Field with the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, “Unacknowledged Tribes, Dangerous Knowledge”; George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and James J. Rawls, *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

8. For example, Our Universes problematizes and contextualizes American

Indian knowledge systems with the specificity of tribal perspectives and struggles for self-determination. The Hupa installation has a video narrated by Marvin, Wendy, and Melodie George that addresses the struggles the Hupa confront in continuing their cultural practices. Because of the interconnectedness of their prayers, medicine, songs, dances, and basket weaving, herbicide and pesticide sprays have had a lasting impact on not only their ecosystems but also the physical health of their basket weavers. Maintaining their culture means risking physical harm. Additionally, because of the dam on the Trinity River, the tribe is forced to request of the Bureau of Reclamation that the water flow be restored every time they want to perform their boat dance ceremonies. While these particular hardships are specific to the Hupa, their genesis in interactions with Euro-Americans and the federal government is shared with very different tribes.

9. Many have written about the “Indian” as a construction, fabrication, or *simulacre* of US colonial and nationalist discourses. See, for instance, Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*; Rayna Green, “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture,” in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in United States Women’s History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge Press, 1990), 15–21; Rayna Green, “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe,” *Folklore* 99, no. 1 (1988): 30–55; Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); and Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

10. For a fuller analysis of Tsinhnahjinnie’s work and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, see Joanne Barker, “Indian™ U.S.A.,” *Wicazō Ša Review: A Native American Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 24–79.

11. In the 1987 installation at the Museum and Man in San Diego, California, Luna’s case was next to two display cases that contained personal documents and objects of ceremonial significance. The juxtaposing of Luna’s body, the historical documents on his family, and objects of cultural patrimony emphasized Luna’s very body as an item of anthropological study.

12. The interviews in this article were unstructured and conducted between 24–25 February, 2005 in various parts of the museum. Names of interviewees are not included to protect their anonymity. All interviewees agreed to be tape recorded and quoted in the article.

13. Museum history and the NMAI’s response to it are more fully addressed in two special issues of the *American Indian Quarterly*. The first issue is guest edited by Amanda J. Cobb (*American Indian Quarterly* 29, nos. 3 and 4 [2005]) and the second by Amy Lonetree (*American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 4 [2006]).

14. Not all reviews of the museum were so nostalgic or disapproving. See Daniel Gibson, “National Museum of the American Indian Opens,” *Native Peoples Magazine*, <http://www.nativepeoples.com> (accessed 1 January 2005); Dugan and Liz Aguilar, “The Opening of the National Museum of the American Indian,” *News from Native California* (Winter 2004): 4–12; Bonnie Gangelhoff, “Cause for Celebration,” *Southwest Art* 34, no. 3 (August 2004): 146–49; Bruce Bernstein, “The National Museum of the American Indian Collections,” *American Indian Art Magazine* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 52–55; Susan Kennedy Keller, “Welcome to Native America,” *Art Tribal* 7 (Winter

2004): 120–33; Claire Smith, “Decolonising the Museum,” *Antiquity* 79, no. 304 (June 2005): 424–39.

15. Edward Rothstein, “Museum with an American Indian Voice,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed 21 September 2004).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Marc Fisher, “Indian Museum’s Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin-Deep,” *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com> (accessed 21 September 2004). See also Paul Richard, “Shards of Many Untold Stories,” *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com> (accessed 21 September 2004); Timothy Noah, “The National Museum of Ben Nighthorse Campbell,” *Slate.com*, <http://www.slate.com> (accessed 29 September 2004); Philip Jenkins, “Indian History without a Guide: The Antimuseum,” *Christian Century* (5 February 2005): 25–29.

18. Fisher, “Indian Museum’s Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin-Deep.”

19. Richard, “Shards of Many Untold Stories.”

20. Noah, “The National Museum of Ben Nighthorse Campbell.” *Slate* is an online newspaper partnered with the *Washington Post*, which is partnered with *Newsweek Magazine*. These are owned by MSNBC, which is owned by General Electric. *Slate* boasts a readership of one million visitors per month. (The *New York Times*, on the other hand, is owned by the New York Times Company and is governed by a board of directors and stockholders.)

21. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

22. *Ibid.* In fact, the Campo Band of Kumayaay Indians of Southern California, whose installation is located in the Our Lives gallery, includes a video short addressing the relative importance of tribal gaming. If Noah had spent any time watching the video, he would have learned that even for “gaming tribes,” gaming has not been a panacea for tribal economies or tribal sovereignty.

23. Noah, “The National Museum of Ben Nighthorse Campbell.”

24. For example, gay/lesbian/bisexual appropriations and strategic redeployments of the word *queer*.

25. This can be further complicated by the fact that the Mohawk of the Kahnawake in Ontario are related to the St. Regis Mohawk and the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne of New York. The video in the Kahnawake installation includes interviews with several Mohawk from New York. This implicitly questions the credibility of the national boundaries of the United States and Canada, preferring instead Mohawk understandings of who counts as Mohawk.

26. E. S. Dempsey, “Piscataway Conoy Tribe Loses Bid for State Recognition,” *Indian Country Today*, <http://www.indiancountry.com> (accessed 2 October 2003).

27. See the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians’ Web site at <http://www.piscatawayindians.org>.