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Contesting Knowledge

Museums and Indigenous Perspectives

SUSAN SLEEPER-SMITH

At the time of European encounter, the first residents of the Americas were divided into at least 2,000 cultures. The original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere did not conceive of themselves as one or even several nations. Most people knew very little about distant communities—awareness was often circumscribed by kin and trade networks. Consequently, because Indigenous peoples did not possess a collective vision of themselves, the idea of the *Indian* or *Indians* emerged as a white image or stereotype. Indians became a single entity for the purposes of description and analysis.

Simultaneously, by categorizing all Indigenous people as Indians, the newcomers downplayed the differences between Indigenous peoples, leading to a centuries-long confusion and a melding of fundamentally incorrect ways of understanding human societies. When Columbus applied the term *Indian* to people in the Caribbean, its use became embedded in narratives of encounter and has continued to the present day. Even early eyewitness accounts that described a specific tribe or community were generalized and often evolved as descriptive of all Indians. Present-day people who use the word *Indian* have little idea of the diversity of cultures and of tribal communities that this term encompasses.

Global expansion created new notions about human nature and embedded knowledge: about the types of societies that met across this stage of encounter in a wealth of objects that were collected from “foreign” cultures and transported to Europe. Many objects were received through the traditional exchange of goods; and, like written narratives, these objects were displayed as a way of telling stories about Indians. Museums, like literary texts, were also purposefully constructed to tell stories about

Western, rather than Indigenous, society. When the objects collected for “cabinets of curiosity” were moved from the private to the public sphere, they visually reinforced the stereotypes associated with Indians. Notions about the “primitive” nature of Indian society influenced what was collected and how it was displayed. Most frequently, Indigenous peoples were described in terms of deficiencies. Consequently, Indians were measured against the ideals of Western society; and whether describing beliefs, values, or institutions, they were measured against the institutions that Western society most cherished about themselves at the time.

The public museum became a meeting ground for official and formal versions of the past. Because history was constructed through objects, curators created the interpretative context for each object. Objects that were placed in museums were initially decontextualized and made to tell an evolutionary narrative about the progress of Western societies and the primitiveness of Indigenous communities. Museums functioned as powerful rhetorical devices that created dominant and often pathological allegiances to a cultural ideal. In the first section of this volume, Ray Silverman shows how these essays explore stereotypes about Indigenous people who shaped the early period of contact. In both Brazil and South Africa, violence was perpetuated against Native peoples and “just wars” were rationalized as a means of imposing a “civilized” order on Indigenous space. For instance, the inscription of “primitive” behaviors, which described Indigenous people as cannibals, raises important issues about how public exhibition space functioned. In displays of human beings as objects, we see how Africans were not silenced even when they allowed themselves to be exhibited. As Zine Magubane tells us,

Those denied the opportunity to express themselves verbally used their bodies, facial expressions, and other nonverbal forms of communication to show that they were sentient beings who knew how humiliating their circumstance was and who wished to live differently. Those who mastered the language and mores of English society were more direct. They challenged the supremacy of English culture and values. They demonstrated their awareness of the shortcomings of English society. And they, like their silenced brethren, insisted on the necessity of independence and self-determination. Others chose the path of si-

lence—showing their displeasure through a deliberate refusal to engage. And still others, like Ota Benga, chose death.

In the Western exhibition of colonized people, the Indigenous voice could not be silenced. Initially, there were no Indigenous museums that described the horrors associated with colonization. As Jacki Rand points out, in the second section of this volume, it was only in the mid-twentieth century that Indigenous people were invited to share power with museum professionals. Museums that sought Indigenous consultation encouraged Native people to make a case for their own humanity and to educate others about ties to ancestral lands. The founding of the National Museum of the American Indian made an attempt to speak directly to the problematized space of public museums and to the troubled relationship between Native and non-Native people. While the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) aspires to a mutually interactive voice that incorporates the museum's professional staff and Native collaborators, the viability of that partnership has often been problematic. The central location of the museum on the mall has transformed the Indian into a prominent public figure, but often the incorporation of multiple storylines into one narrative has constrained the multiplicity of those voices that create those narratives.

In section three, Brenda Child describes the dramatic contrast between the National Museum of the American Indian and the movement toward the creation of tribal museums. Tribal museums represent one of the most effective ways of serving diverse communities. Each Indigenous nation possesses a distinct historical tradition, and it is the tribal museum that embodies Indigenous perspectives and serves the more varied needs of individual communities. Tribal museums function as preservation projects that teach traditional narratives and lifeways and, above all, serve the needs of the individual communities. Educating the broader public remains part of the tribal museum project, although it is no longer at the heart of these newer museums.

The last section of this volume is devoted to exploring how tribal museums have changed since the early days of the 1960s and 1970s. As the beneficiaries of enhanced public awareness and changing educational priorities, they have increasingly functioned as both museums and centers

of community life. All of these museums are remarkable because in their diversity they testify to the ongoing revitalization of Native life.

Many of the changes that are apparent in the museums across North America are also evident across the global landscape. The demand to create alternative narratives and to give force to formerly colonized peoples parallels the same issues that have evolved in Indian Country. Indigenous museums founded within communities remind us that colonized landscapes were once the homelands of these oppressed peoples. While museums may have emerged as part of the original colonial project, they have been put to new purposes. Their reinvention parallels the changes that are taking place in Indian Country. Whether it is South Africa or all of Africa, Mexico and Brazil or all of South America, Indigenous people are using museums to emerge from invisibility and to deconstruct the colonization narrative from the viewpoint of the oppressed. At the heart of these projects is a multiplicity of voices, a variety of narratives, and the use of museums as tools of revitalization. While techniques vary, the ability to construct meaningful narratives, defined by a variety of perspectives, has led to a global surge in the number of tribal museums.

These chapters were presented as papers on September 24, 2007, at the Newberry Library as part of the CIC/Newberry Library American Indian Studies Fall Symposium entitled *Indigenous Past and Present: First Annual Symposium, Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*. The symposium was organized and supported by the CIC–American Indian Studies Consortium. The CIC–AIS Consortium faculty are drawn from the Big Ten universities and the University of Chicago, and they share an interest in American Indian Studies. This pool of CIC faculty relies on the consortium to foster faculty research and to share in the training of graduate students. CIC faculty teach workshops, seminars, and encourage networking across the graduate student body through the annual spring graduate conference. Additional information about the CIC–AIS Consortium is located on their website: <http://www.msu.edu/~cicaisc>.

This symposium has been supported by the CIC–Liberal Arts and Sciences Deans and their support has generously been supplemented by

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Contributors

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Miranda J. Brady's research addresses issues of representation, identity, and power in the use of public media. She examines how technologies of mediation and cultural policies are employed by institutions to shape the terms of American Indian involvement in public and political life. In 2007 Brady was awarded a short-term fellowship from the Newberry Library's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History. Her recent work is concerned with the use of digital media in public spaces, discourse, and political economy. Brady's dissertation examined the intersection of cultural policy, power, nationalism, and digital technology in the National Museum of the American Indian. She is an assistant professor of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

M. Teresa Carlson is originally from Vancouver Island on British Columbia's west coast. She has a BA and postgraduate diplomas in cultural resource management from the University of Victoria. She has worked in museums and cultural centers for almost twenty years. She found the years she spent at Stó:lō Nation creating a cultural center and archaeological repository to be the most rewarding, as she was able to engage in collaborative research, including various topics in Aboriginal self-governance, culture and heritage, rights and title, education, and exhibits and programming. In 2001 she moved to Saskatoon with her husband, Keith, and their two children. She is currently the acting director of the Diefenbaker Canada Centre at the University of Saskatchewan, the only Prime Ministerial museum, archives, and research center in Canada. The Diefenbaker Centre hosts a wide variety of exhibits and associated educational programming.

Brenda J. Child (Red Lake Ojibwe) is an associate professor of American studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her book *Boarding School Seasons: Ameri-*

can Indian Families, 1900–1940 won the North American Indian Prose Award. She is a member of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society and the Indian advisory committee to the Eiteljorg Museum.

Brian Isaac Daniels is a doctoral student in history and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses upon how cultural heritage laws and cultural institutions engender historical awareness. Daniels has an extended ethnographic commitment to western North America, where he has worked with Native communities on issues surrounding heritage rights, repatriation, and recognition. As a joint-degree student he is currently at work writing two dissertations: one about the political uses of heritage laws by Indigenous communities and the other about museums, preservation laws, and the production of history in the United States. His research has been underwritten by fellowships from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Gwyneira Isaac obtained her PhD from Oxford University in 2002; she is an assistant professor and director of the Museum of Anthropology at the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on the relationships people develop with their past through material culture, leading her to explore the history of anthropology and photography as well as the development of tribal museums in the Southwest. Bridging these different topics has resulted in her interest in developing theories that integrate anthropology, art, and history to form interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches to the study of society. She has conducted fieldwork at the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center in Zuni, New Mexico, and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Her book, *Mediating Knowledges: Origins of a Zuni Tribal Museum*, has recently been published by the University of Arizona Press.

Hal Langfur teaches the history of Brazil, colonial Latin America, and the Atlantic world as well as ethnohistory at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is the author of *The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750–1830* and editor of the forthcoming *Native Brazil: Beyond the Cannibal and the Convert, 1500–1889*. His articles have appeared in various U.S. and Brazilian academic journals, including the *Journal of Social History*, the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, the *Americas*, *Ethnohistory*, *Revista da História*, and *Tempo*. He is currently working on a book-length study entitled “Adrift on an Inland Sea: The Projection of Colonial Power in the Brazilian Wilderness.”

Paul Liffman is a research professor in the Center for Anthropological Studies at the Colegio de Michoacán; he previously worked as a consultant and translator for the Wixarika (Huichol) exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian. His dissertation, “Huichol Territoriality: Land and Cultural Claims in Western Mexico,” is based on six years of fieldwork with Huichols, primarily in San Andrés Cohamiata,

as well as with AJAGI, the nongovernmental organization that most strongly backed Huichol demands for land restitution. This fieldwork was supported by Fulbright and Wenner-Gren Foundation grants and by CIESAS–Occidente. The thesis deals with the relationship between ceremonial place-making and with the construction of territory and its representation in legal and cultural claims in the courts, political venues, Indigenous schools, and the press.

Amy Lonetree is an enrolled citizen of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin. In 2002 she earned a PhD in ethnic studies from the University of California, Berkeley, where she specialized in Native American history and museum studies. Her scholarly work focuses on the representation of Indigenous people in both national and tribal museums; she has conducted research on this topic at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, the Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, and the British Museum. She has published articles based on this research in *American Indian Quarterly* and *Public Historian* and has recently edited a collection, with Amanda J. Cobb, on the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (University of Nebraska Press, 2008). She is currently assistant professor of American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Brenda Macdougall is an assistant professor in the Department of Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. Having recently completed her dissertation and PhD at the University of Saskatchewan, Macdougall has begun work on several research projects, including developing a digital archive capturing sources related to Western Canadian First Nations and Metis history in the twentieth century, examining the history of the Round Prairie Metis, and collaborating with researchers from the universities of Alberta and Saskatchewan as well as from the Northwest Saskatchewan Metis Council to produce an atlas of the Metis experience in northwestern Saskatchewan. She is currently teaching in the Department of Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

Zine Magubane is an associate professor of sociology and African diaspora studies at Boston College. She is the author of *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Class, and Gender in Britain and Colonial South Africa*; editor of *Postmodernism, Postcoloniality, and African Studies*; and coeditor of *Hear Our Voices: Black South African Women in the Academy*. Magubane has published in *Gender and Society*, *Cultural Studies*, and *Africa Today*. She is currently working on a book called *Brand the Beloved Country: Africa in Celebrity Culture*, which looks at the role of celebrity philanthropy in Africa.

Ann McMullen holds a PhD in anthropology from Brown University and, since 2000, has been a curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. Beyond work on the NMAI's 2004 inaugural exhibitions, her research and publications have focused on Native people of northeastern North America, especially

material cultures, traditions, innovation, and commercialization; the intersection of ethnography and ethnohistory; Native historiography and invented traditions; and the nature and transformation of Native communities and community networks.

Jacki Thompson Rand is an associate professor of history at the University of Iowa. She received a PhD from the Department of History at the University of Oklahoma in 1998. Her book, *Kiowa Humanity and the Invasion of the State*, is a study of Kiowa relations with the state during the last quarter of the nineteenth century; the book centers on the lives of ordinary Kiowa women and young men during the establishment of the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache reservation in 1867 through the post-allotment period to 1910. Through the tracking of material objects associated with Kiowa women and young men she has created a study of reservation and postreservation society and economy, of actions taken by the state at the federal and agency level that shaped the context of Kiowa lives, and of the persistence of Kiowa humanity shaped by tribalism in the face of inhumane treatment and conditions. Rand has recently completed a fellowship at the Newberry Library, where she embarked on her next project, an examination of twentieth-century Indian-State relations in a transnationalist framework.

Ciraj Rassool is an associate professor of history and chairperson of the History Department at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa, where he also directs the African Program in Museum and Heritage Studies. He has written widely on public history, visual history, and resistance historiography. Rassool is a trustee of the District Six Museum and the South African History Archive. He is also a councilor of Iziko Museums of Cape Town and the National Heritage Council. He is co-author of *Skeletons in the Cupboard: South African Museums and the Trade in Human Remains 1907–1917*; and coeditor of *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* and *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*.

Jennifer Shannon is currently a postdoctoral teaching fellow in the Department of Anthropology at The University of British Columbia. Her research interests include Indigenous rights and representation, focusing more recently on Indigenous self-representation, collaborative practice, and the anthropology of museums. Prior to her work at Cornell, from 1999 to 2002 she worked as a researcher in the curatorial department at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, contributing to two ongoing galleries: *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories* and *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities*. Based on two years of fieldwork from 2004 to 2006 at the National Museum of the American Indian and in Native communities featured in its exhibitions, Shannon's dissertation documents the collaborative relationships and exhibit-making processes involved in the making of the *Our Lives* gallery about contemporary Native life.

Ray Silverman is a professor of history of art and Afroamerican and African Studies and serves as director of the Museum Studies Program at the University of Michigan. From 1988 to 2002 he was a member of the Michigan State University faculty. In addition to teaching courses dealing with the visual cultures of Africa, he has curated a number of exhibitions dealing with African visual culture at the MSU Museum and Kresge Art Museum and at the UCLA Fowler Museum. Silverman's research and writing has examined the interaction between West Africa and the cultures of the Middle East and Europe, the history of metal technologies in Ethiopia and Ghana, the social values associated with creativity in Ethiopia, the visual culture of religion in twentieth-century Ethiopia, and the commodification of art in Ethiopia and Ghana. Most recently he has been exploring museum culture in Africa, specifically how local knowledge is translated in national and community-based cultural institutions.

Susan Sleeper-Smith is the author of *Indian Women: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* and coeditor of the collection *New Faces of the Fur Trade*. She has published in *Ethnohistory*, *AHR*, *JAH*, *Reviews in American History*, the *William & Mary Quarterly*, and *Recherches amérindiennes*. Her work focuses on metissage as a site of inquiry, an exploration that opens new pathways for examining encounter as well as the construction of national histories. She is a member of the Indian Studies faculty at Michigan State University and serves as the director of the CIC–American Indian Studies Consortium. A Mortar Board recipient for outstanding teaching, she counts her students and her teaching as her most important credentials.