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The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

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Absorbing or obscuring the absence of a critical space in the Americas for indigeneity

The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

JOLENE RICKARD

The contentious relationship between Indigenous and First Nation peoples and the American Indian Museum, known as the Heye Foundation, was legendary. Formerly located in New York City, the Heye Foundation, now transformed into the Smithsonian's National American Indian Museum (NMAI), relocated and opened in 2004 in Washington, D.C. This transformation into NMAI created an opportunity for a new relationship between the museum and Native communities and a much broader global audience. The long subway ride up to the Bronx in New York City to look at Indian art has been replaced by a pleasant drive to a sleek new archive in Suitland, Maryland, and a leisurely walk to a signature building on the Mall in Washington, D.C., showcasing one of the most important collections of Native American cultural expressions globally.

Promises/Promising

The museum's frequently touted promise to return the authority of cultural representation to Native peoples felt like a tease after centuries of colonial subjugation. It played out as hundreds of Native people were invited to express their thoughts concerning the formation of NMAI over several years in "vetting" sessions. These sessions were meant to reach into "Indian country" and embrace grass-root perspectives about the possibilities for the museum. A wide range of Native peoples were consulted concerning the formation of the museum as evidence of the desire to shake up the paradigm of colonial representation. Included in the community consultations were not only the so-called grass-root Native peoples, but also Native academic specialists such as Seneca historian John Mohawk, Mohawk historian Taiakake Alfred, and many more. The organizers of the museum thought they took a unique step when they consulted Native peoples across the hemisphere, thus engaging multiple voices in the formation of NMAI. Specialists in Native American art would argue that the process of informed consultation is the standard practice in the field of Native American art

history since the mid-1980s.¹ The subtext of who is empowered to speak in NMAI is perhaps the most allusive, yet important, aspect of the museum.

The notion that the exhibitions were curated from a "community perspective" is, on the surface, a safe assumption. However, the exhibition installations at NMAI are a complex negotiation of spaces curated by representatives of the Native community and individual museum workers. The visitor will be hard-pressed to differentiate between the exhibits mounted by community representatives collaborating with NMAI curators and those put up by Native curatorial specialists. Only two of the three permanent gallery spaces were curated with both kinds of consultation. Perhaps this would not have been problematic if revisionary Indigenous or Native history was uniformly accepted by academia. Academic authorities would have validated the translation of these views to a broader public. In contrast, a number of curatorial strategies were criticized as not accurately representing history.

There has been a great deal of confusion about the role NMAI plays as a museum. On the opening day, the former director W. Richard West emphasized the community or grass-root collaborations but did not mention the contribution of Native curatorial professionals. The press jumped on the absence of a Native intelligentsia as an opportunity to dismiss engaging the museum as a site not only of revisionary Indigenous history but also of innovation in museological display. This was further complicated by the fact that there is no single curatorial perspective at play at NMAI. Multiple curatorial styles bump up against each other, often within the same gallery.

The first wave of negative reviews insisted that the museum did not measure up to a strict disciplinary

1. See Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*. Oxford History of Art (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

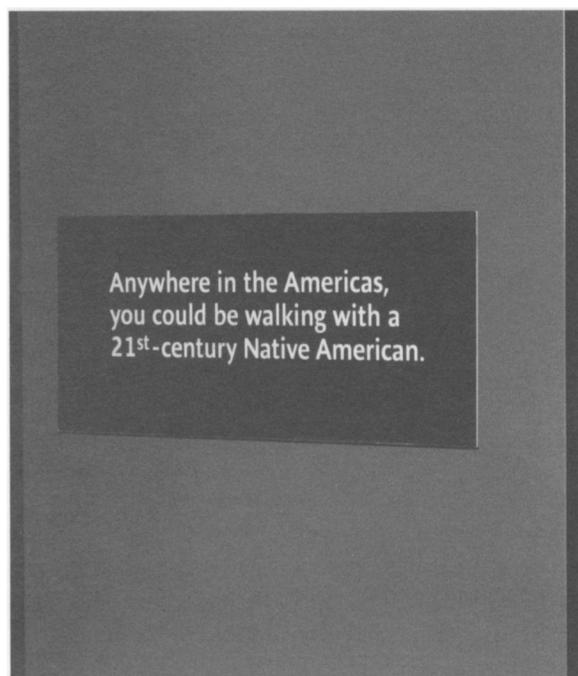


Figure 1. "Our Lives" gallery at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. features an interactive media entryway. Visitors see their own reflection in conjunction with projection of images of Indigenous peoples from all over the Americas but currently located in D.C. Photograph by the author.

framing as defined by anthropology, art, art history, history, or natural history. So when Marc Fisher and Paul Richard from *The Washington Post* and Edward Rothstein from *The New York Times* gave the museum bad reviews within the first week of the opening, negative press had a field day.² Perched in their powerful posts, these writers criticized the museum for being anti-intellectual and for failing to maintain disciplinary boundaries. The second wave of criticism was from Native scholars who focused on the historical content, or, they would argue, lack thereof, that was represented in the museum.³ Of course, the museum did

2. For journalistic and cultural critiques, see Marc Fisher, "Indian Museum's Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin Deep," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2004; Paul Richard, "Shards of Many Untold Stories: In Place of Unity, A Mélange of Unconnected Objects," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2004; Edward Rothstein, "Who Should Tell History, The Tribes or the Museums?" *The New York Times*, December 21, 2004.

3. See Nancy Marie Mithlo, "Red Man's Burden: The Politics of Inclusion in Museum Setting," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, nos. 3

not imagine itself as a new anthropology or art museum—all it wanted was to further complicate and undermine the ongoing stereotyping of Native peoples (fig. 1).

NMAI is not strictly an art, anthropology, or social history museum. The transgression of these disciplinary boundaries is precisely what challenges conventional notions of museological formation. However, the concerns of those NMAI curators who tried to interrogate the basic canonical space of the museum practice as colonial or a product of the West have not been adequately addressed. I will argue that there are several aspects of the physical space of the museum and curatorial interventions that challenge inherently Western or European classification systems and initiate the process of representational decolonization. I am not suggesting that the entire project has these aspirations (for example, the problem of focusing on the visual display is presented as secondary to the written text and demand for narrative history), but that very significant elements within the museum express this desire.

The effort to provide multiple views of history or to contribute to a revision of Native history is almost impossible, because there is no agreement among the Native scholars on what is the official narrative of Native history. One way to view the criticism laid out by Native scholars is to realize that NMAI is the first attempt at creating a hemispheric Indigenous imaginary. The non-Native visitors, Indigenous scholars, and individual community members all have a private imagery of how the "real" Indigenous experience looks, sounds, and feels. I believe that people have very stable private opinions about Native people that are not easily dislodged. Perhaps the most elaborate ideas of this sort are held by Native scholars, which makes the attempt by NMAI look unsatisfactory compared to their own imaginaries about Indigeneity. For instance, Native scholar Amy Lonetree has specifically applauded the text of my collaborator Paul Chaat Smith but has expressed disappointment with the way the concept of "evidence" was visualized in the "Our Peoples" exhibition.⁴ What if the museum puts on public display a very individual vision of Indigeneity?

and 4 (2004):743–763; and Amy Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI," *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2006):632–645.

4. See Amy Lonetree, "Continuing Dialogues: Evolving View of the National Museum of the American Indian," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 2 (2006):57–61.

The convergence of the destabilization of the role of museums in society and the realization that there is no agreement in Native communities in relation to such central concepts as sovereignty, the use of the term genocide to describe contact with the West, the notion of autonomous Native nationhood (not citizenship), and more, made the task of creating strategic take-away messages nearly impossible. Parallel to the shift in the field of art history, the inclusion of art beyond the West called for a fundamental revision of the way art and material culture are framed. The relationships among the disciplinary boundaries of art, anthropology, and history are reconsidered in academic practice, and the museum becomes a natural extension of this process.

Circles/Squares

The physical structure of the museum becomes an overt attempt at inserting an Indigenous aesthetic into an inherently European architectural landscape. Do Native people own curvilinear space? I would argue that whereas the selection of the architect, Douglas Cardinal, and his design is not naturally or intuitively "Native," it functions as a physical intervention on the European-influenced structures on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Therefore, the building acts as the first signal that the visitor is about to witness or experience a philosophical shift. The building is meant to communicate that the philosophical underpinnings of Indigenous cultures, cobbled together by centuries of colonial resistance, signify difference. This stands in contrast to the "museum as tourist destination" buildings, such as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain. The Bilbao project continues the discussion of modernity in a Western context. NMAI's building is a necessary intervention within a singular notion of modernity made in anticipation of the impact of globalization. The occupation of this space as a "Native place" in Washington, D.C., is part of a national and international emergence of Indigenous presence.

Globalization as a central characteristic of the twenty-first century is a great concern for cultures historically located on the margins.⁵ Does this kind of physical assertion of "Indigenous worldviews" act as a counterbalance to the flattening process of globalization? Does a Native museum become the new

site of internment or reservation with a settler's colonial geography? In part, NMAI represents a successful capture of a very prized space on the Mall, and it should also serve as a reminder of the erasure of entire Indigenous cultures not only from that site but also across the Americas. The triumph of creating NMAI does temporarily satisfy Indigenous desire for a wider political recognition. The presence or visibility of Indigenous peoples in North America is impacted by the place of the museum in society. On one level, the existence of a museum that focuses on the Native population of the Americas does remind the non-Native public about our cultures, but it cannot replace the much needed political infrastructure within contemporary nation states. The absence of an Indigenous embassy in Washington puts added pressure on the expectations for the museum. Add to this the fact that the recent acceptance of the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples was supported by 132 countries globally, but not by the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand, making the realization of NMAI more remarkable. Not only do Indigenous people not have an embassy but we also do not have separate art, history, science, or other cultural institutions on the same scale as NMAI. All of these factors contribute to the impossible mission of the museum and the dissatisfaction expressed by some Native historians. Ironically, attendance at NMAI was estimated at 800,000 within four months, making it one of the most popular museums on the Mall.

In his introduction of NMAI to the press, W. Richard West also focused on the elaborate consultation NMAI staff conducted with Native peoples across the Americas and their collaboration with in-house NMAI curators when producing a series of community exhibitions that told "our stories." An articulation of the paradigm shift in museum practice was not addressed or suggested. The focusing on "the voice of the people" strategy was allowed to avoid the possibility that Indigenous museum professionals and intellectuals could have strategized an Indigenous framing as an intervention on continued colonial framings. Perhaps the most powerful statement of the opening festivities was the procession of Native nations that took place on the Mall. Thousands of Indigenous peoples from across the Americas marched in traditional clothing as an honoring of and welcoming for the museum. This act made visible the presence of hundreds of Native nations acting as a powerful reminder of the continuance of our nations and traditions. The procession was a potent antidote to the notion of vanished Indians who exist only on DVDs and

5. See *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*, ed. Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpus. Sierra Club Books (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

to the unsettling dominant encounter of the museum visitor with a Native person as electronic apparition.

The *American Indian Quarterly Journal* dedicated a discussion to NMAI in 2005.⁶ In particular, an essay by the journal's editor, Amanda Cobb, provides a glimpse into the formation and organization of the museum. My collaborator, Paul Chaat Smith, has recently published an insider's view.⁷ NMAI has three permanent exhibitions and one semipermanent gallery. The permanent exhibitions are referred to as "Our Universes," "Our Lives," and "Our Peoples." I was brought in as a guest curator for the "Our Lives" and "Our Peoples" galleries along with in-house curators Paul Chaat Smith and Gabrielle Tayac. "Our Universes," curated by Amil Her Many Horses, is about indigenous cosmologies, "Our Lives" is about contact histories, and "Our Peoples" is about contemporary identity. The basic mapping of these themes was in place when I arrived on the project. As guest curator for two of the permanent exhibitions at NMAI, I will address the translation of Native perspectives into exhibition practice contextualized within the broader framework of the reception of the museum by the press, academy, and Indigenous America as an intervention on coloniality. Although there are a number of installations within NMAI that are counter-narratives to colonialism, I will focus in this discussion on two key installations: the representation of contact in "Our Peoples" gallery and the media "presence" of Native people at the entry of the "Our Lives" gallery.

Collaborators—Tayac, Chaat Smith, and I—did research, wrote, and curated with a focus on the representational issues of Indigenous peoples. Each of us had articulated a position on the history and contemporary experiences of Native people from a particular angle. Tayac brought considerable experience in the area of Central and Latin American Indigenous history. Chaat Smith's strength as a writer and political historian blended well with my interest in material culture and the visual. As a curator, I saw myself as making an intervention on the framing of Native cultures within a metanarrative of the West. Familiar with the artistic interventions into museum collections such as

the much-publicized work of Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, or the assemblage of examples by James Putman in his text *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, I proceeded to look for an opportunity in the collection to recapture Indigenous history with the very objects that represented our capture. The use of the collection was not considered a priority by museum staff because of the input from the consultation process. Based on my experience, people in the Haudenosaunee communities did not trust the museum as a site of equity but were still interested in the holdings.

Gold/Gold

Chaat Smith and Ann McMullen had been circling around the impact of contact between the Indigenous people and the West and had assembled a large chalkboard of "evidence" of the contribution of the Indigenous peoples to the world when the contact took place. Everyone agreed that contributions of the Americas to the Western world such as potatoes, rubber, and corn were all-important but not visually inspiring. I had been looking for other evidence in the archives that would reveal the impact of contact by examining the object records. At the same time, I was also reading about the exhibition, the year 1492, and Eduardo Galeano's moving book *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. Additionally, I was making visits to galleries in D.C. and New York when I realized that I had to erase the "evidence" board. I wanted to see NMAI's gold collection. Gold is as valued today as it was in 1492. The perception of Indigenous America continues to be one of an impoverished place. The focus on hundreds of pieces of gold in transition from being cosmological markers to centerpieces of a monetary exchange system that revitalized a global economy repositions Indigenous cultures as having abundant wealth. The intent of the gold installation is to demonstrate the multivalent experience of gold from both cosmological and economic perspectives (fig. 2).

It provided an opportunity to create a bridge from today to the past. I was very conscious of the museological, in particular Cartesian, mappings of category of the object as the preferred scholarly approach to this material. The choice to present the gold from specific cultural perspectives with attention to the objects' initial use would have been the logical and safe approach. However, I wanted to make an intervention and signal a disruption of the use of this material as typological survey. Gold for Indigenous peoples is a

6. See Amanda Cobb, "The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty," *American Indian Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005):485–506.

7. See Paul Chaat Smith, "The Terrible Nearness of Distant Places: Making History at the National Museum of the American Indian," in *Indigenous Experience Today*, ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007).

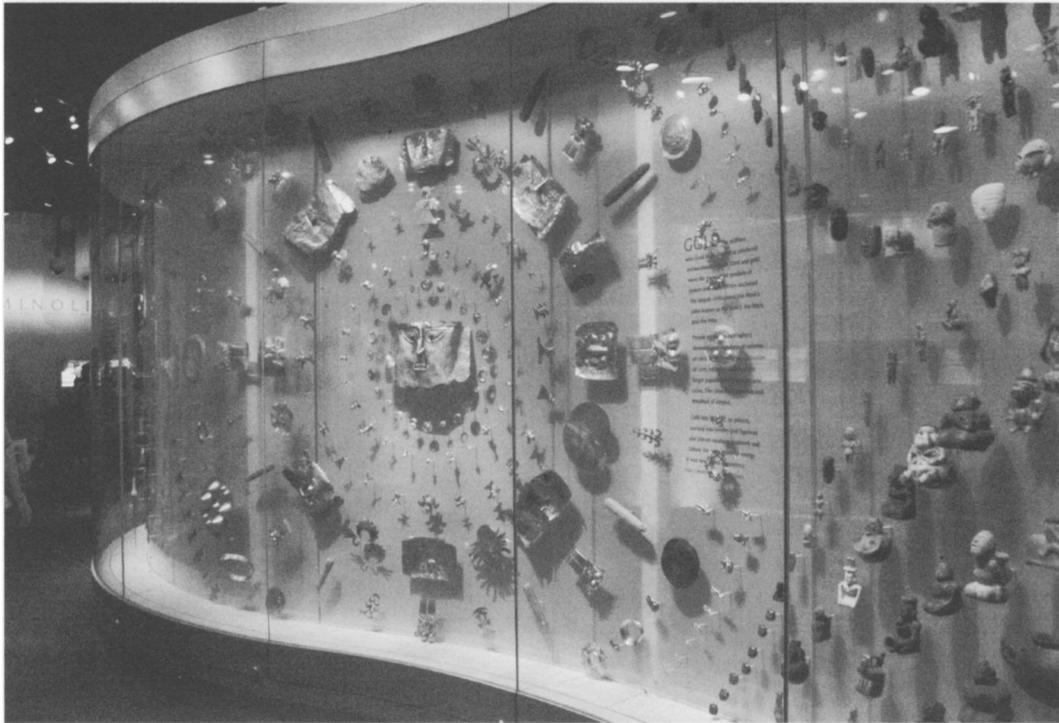


Figure 2. The installation of the gold wall in “Our Peoples” gallery, National Museum of the American Indian. Photograph by the author.

symbol of power and I wanted to restore that power as a sign of rebirth or recovery, not loss. I wanted the visitor to experience the power of gold, even if for some it still is only an exercise in economic value. I could not do this if I maintained a singular art historical, anthropological, or cultural historical framing of the object.

During a visit to galleries in New York, I wandered through the installation of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*. I immediately had a sensation that the space evoked by these forms shifted the viewer’s perception of place. The curvilinear interior of Cardinal’s museum design called for an echo. The curvilinear wall in “Our Peoples” gallery was thus introduced not as a response to Douglas Cardinal’s overall museum design but to help destabilize further a static notion of history, so that the installation of the objects and the physical space work in tandem to signal to the visitors dynamic change. The figures flow into the gold that forms a central or focal point in this installation. Indigenous relationships to the gold are closely linked to the sun as part of the transformative properties of this material. The gold objects are meant to radiate from the center and move into shock-wave patterns that represent the second

transformation of this gold from an Indigenous statement to a European statement. Although Chaat Smith, McMullen, and I realized that we were not going to be able to tell the story of genocide at contact as a narrative, I believe there is enough “evidence” for visitors willing to engage the museum space to find this dark truth. I do not think that any museum presentation or installation will ever answer the tragedy that shaped the contemporary Americas.

The Smithsonian and our own research standard required that the historic record in our sections back up every concept. Therefore, we made the decision to use direct quotes from the historic record as evidence. In this case, Chaat Smith wrote in a wall text at “Our Peoples” gallery:

The Prize

The Americas had a seemingly endless supply of land, timber, silver and gold—all on a scale no European had ever imagined. A Spanish visitor to Cuzco, spiritual center of the Inka Empire, described a garden where the dirt itself was made of gold: “In one of the houses, there was the figure of the sun, very large and made of gold, ingeniously work and enriched with many precious stones . . . they had also a garden, the clods of which were made of pieces of

fine gold and it was artificially sown with golden maize, the stalks as well as the leaves and cobs being of that metal.

—Pedro Cieza de Leon, chronicler of
Francisco Pizarro's travels, 1592.⁸

In another wall text in the same gallery, Chaat Smith wrote:

Wealth, Power, Abundance

The first 150 years of contact witnessed one of the greatest transfers of wealth in world history. Gold, silver and labor from the Americas created and transformed international economies and permanently linked the Western Hemisphere with Europe, Asia and Africa. Riches from the Americas made Spain an international superpower whose domination stretched from Europe to South America and the Philippines. It was the largest Western empire since the age of Julius Caesar. The transfer of gold and silver had dire costs. Perhaps 20 million Indians died as a direct result of contact. Tens of million more perished from disease. Little of the gold made by Native people before contact survives in this original form. Museum and collectors hold almost all of what remains.⁹

Other labels detailed the transition of gold from the Americas to Europe, specifically, the transition of gold from a cultural symbol to money:

Money

The 1500s saw an upsurge in coinage across the planet. These coins were minted from gold from the Americas. Silver from the Americas was also turned into money. Between 1503 and 1650, more than 35 million pounds of silver entered Seville, Spain. This wealth fueled the rise of capitalism and helped Europe dominate the world.¹⁰

According to an NMAI mandate, every label had to be signed by the writer or "author" as an attempt to create both authenticity of voice and transparency. This inequity suggests that the text is more important than the image. In the case of my role as guest curator, I would argue the opposite. I would defend the position that the visitor is drawn to read the text because of the presentation of the material. Ironically, the most seductive spaces did not require "authorship" by any writer. The design of the installations and the embedded concepts were not labeled. Hundreds of pre-contact sculptured figures, placed in flowing rivers leading to a starburst of gold do entice the visitor to read an

explanatory text about what this means. But I feel the "reading" part begins the moment one sees the installation. In this case, the image is a text, meant to be "read" in conjunction with the written word. NMAI provided an opportunity to visualize history through the use of the collection and to collaborate with a wordsmith to create an accompanying written narrative. Because NMAI did not acknowledge the "visual" as "text" by creating a parallel labeling system, the viewer recognized only the "authority" of the text. This lost opportunity undermined in part a fundamental decolonizing strategy. One of the most problematic subjugating framings to overcome is the suggestion that Native people are a people without history. History from a European or Western perspective is about the written word. History for Indigenous cultures is both a visual and an oral process with the recent addition of the written word. If Native people want to expand the authority of our understanding of reality, we also need to advocate for multiple systems of representing history. NMAI's collection is a massive assemblage of representational evidence of the history of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Adjustment in academia, in the fields of art history, literary studies, and the emergent area of visual and cultural studies are accounting for the destabilization of the written word as the essential text and recognizing photography, art, material culture, and other forms of visual expression as equally authoritative "texts."

A single person cannot "curate" the entire museum, but she can use opportunities within the exhibitions to recognize the attempt to balance "Indigenous records of history" against the West's "historic record." This was a conscious act on my part as guest curator for NMAI. The sculptural figurines and gold in the "Our Peoples" gallery are "historical texts" intended to be read in this installation as evidence of Indigenous continuity and diversity in the Americas, as well as the multiple readings of wealth, from both the cosmological and material perspectives. These installations were conceived as shifting the status of the individual "object" into a larger Indigenous history, as well as tracing its becoming "evidence" that could be found in the European historical record. The dialogue between the visual assemblage and authority of the written label eclipsed the opportunity to view both elements as parallel histories. Instead, we are left with the unsettling notion that the text label provides the narrative for the object installation. Further, because representatives of the Native people "authored" the labels, the authority is returned to the written word, instead of revealing

8. Quoted from the wall text in "Our Peoples" exhibition gallery at NMAI, written by Paul Chaat Smith in collaboration with Ann McMullen and Jolene Rickard.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

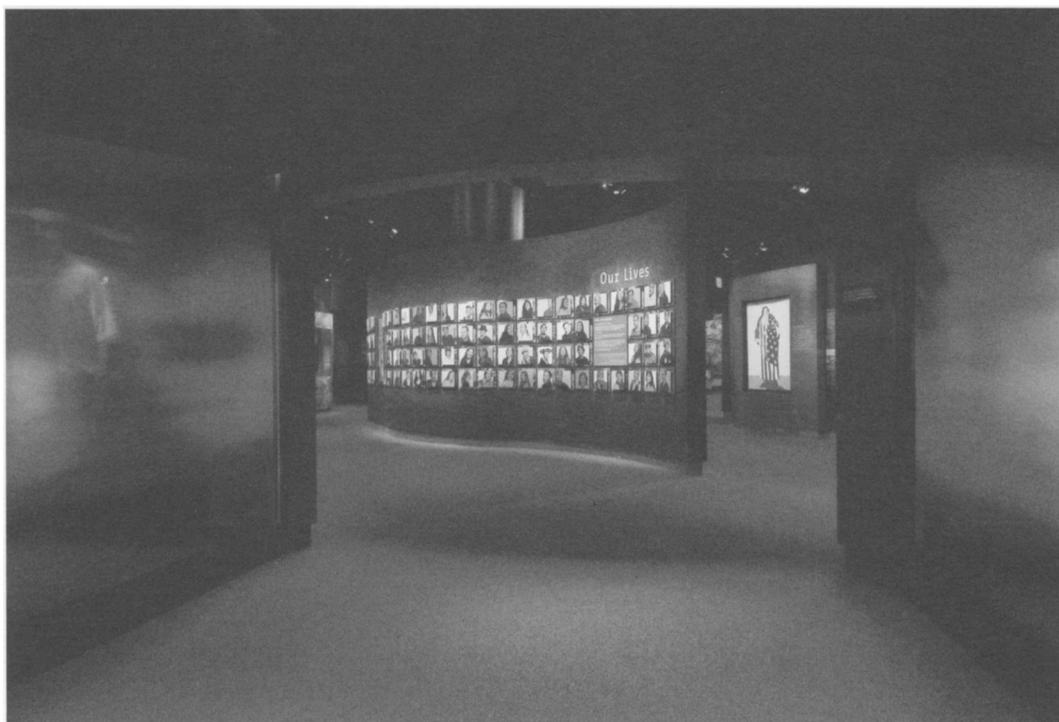


Figure 3. The entryway to “Our Lives” gallery, National Museum of the American Indian. Photograph by the author.

multiple constructions of history as embedded in every object on display in the museum. The opportunity to read these installations from a multivalent historical perspective is still possible if one recognizes the object as the Indigenous historical text.

Past/Present

I thought I was on firm ground when I suggested the use of multiple ceramic figurines in “Our Peoples” gallery to address the debate of how populated the Americas were at contact. Each figure stands in for a community or culture that needs to be better understood. I see these ceramic figures—specifically selected from all across the Americas—as representing the diversity of voices from our past. Through the use of the collection and the media installation, I wanted to create a dialogue among the hundreds of cultures and Indigenous peoples that we no longer know about. This is why visitors are required to pass through a media projection as they enter “Our Lives” gallery.

The figures created a presence, a reminder of an ongoing unmarked past of Indigeneity in the Americas. One cannot deny the ongoing erasure of Indigenous

presence in the Americas since contact. The entry to “Our Lives,” the “contemporary” gallery, created a liminal engagement with Indigenous people. As you enter the gallery, you are directed through a rear-view media projection onto a very subtle two-way mirror. This surface allows the visitor to “walk” with a group of people against a soundscape of everyday discussion. The visitor sees himself or herself in the media projection as part of an “Indigenous” landscape. The concept of the “presence of the absence,” authored by an Anishinabe scholar, Gerald Vizenor, became the inspiration for creating this space. If Native and non-Native people can begin to imagine sharing the same space, perhaps the larger project of the Americas coming to terms with a growing Indigenous presence can be considered. As you pass through this portal, you encounter a single modest plaque at the end: “Anywhere you stand in the Americas, you could be standing next to an Indigenous person” (fig. 3).

Absorb/Obscure

NMAI provides an opportunity for the Americas and all settler-nation states to reconsider their relationship

with Indigenous peoples in this hemisphere and, perhaps, globally. The recovery of Native voices within museological space cannot just be a textual shift but must also deconstruct conventional display strategies as an intervention. Ironically, the massive circular display of gold established a focal point or "target," marking contact with the Americas from both the historical and contemporary points of view. The media projection in "Our Lives" gallery is far less obvious, but perhaps suggests that the real "subjects" of the Native museum today are perhaps the most elusive—the living Indians. If (as I have suggested) the objects and stories stand in for an Indigenous framing of history, how does this differ from any museum "collection"? These "collections" continue to inform an inherently Western construct of ownership, but perhaps something else happened because of NMAI. Peppered throughout the experience of the opening with the Procession of Native Nations and in every installation in the museum, the visitor encounters photographic, digital, and film representations of contemporary, living Native people. This encounter is long overdue and the museum provides a first safe space to begin to reconnect with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. NMAI cannot stand in for the political and legal infrastructure necessary to sustain Indigenous America, but it reminds the nerve center of the most powerful country in the world to rethink its ongoing colonizing encounters.