

EXHIBITING VOICES
THE PRESENCE OF NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

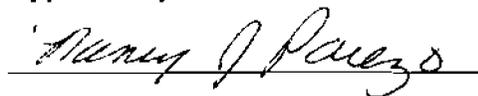
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Abstract

Western society has a long history of misrepresenting Native Americans. In the United States, museum exhibitions, where the majority of American people are most likely to gain exposure to Native Americans, have historically reified stereotypes of indigenous people and excluded community members from the exhibit development process. An indigenous rights movement began in the last half of the twentieth century, drawing international attention to Native issues. Linked to this indigenous rights movement was a series of museum exhibitions that were developed in consultation with indigenous communities. These exhibits at regional museums were early attempts to more accurately represent Native Americans, although their location meant they were not always noticed on the national level. Symbolically leading the advancement in museum techniques of representation is the National Museum of the American Indian, where Native peoples are involved at all levels of museum organization. This research examines techniques of representing Native American voices at three Arizona museums, each with exhibits installed at different stages of this shift in representation practices.

“I am speaking from a place in the margin where I am different, where I see things differently...”

-bell hooks (1996)

Introduction

Walking through a gallery on Native Americans at a prominent museum in Los Angeles, I was struck by how disconnected I felt from the communities and people about which I was supposed to be learning. The exhibit left me with the sense that these groups were primitive, different, and aloof from the world I knew. Had I not been previously exposed to the discussions and criticisms of Native American stereotypes, I might have been inclined to believe that these traits characterized the Native peoples of southern California. What was in the exhibit that allowed me to develop these ideas? Or rather more important, what was not in the exhibit that gave me these ideas? The Los Angeles museum exhibit displayed a life-size diorama of a Chumash village with scantily clad figures and a cluttered space, nineteenth century baskets, and photographs without captions. Little interpretation, from either curators or community members, was provided.

While it is important to engage visitors in the exhibit’s dialogue and encourage them to draw their own conclusions from the discussion, it is important that these conclusions be informed. The lack of interpretation in this exhibit is problematic because while it allowed visitors to form their own conclusions, the exhibit unintentionally validated common misconceptions about Native Americans and allowed visitors to walk away misinformed about the Native peoples of California. Even more important, the exhibit was missing the voice of Native Americans. By including Native American interpretation and narratives, museum exhibits acknowledge the importance of self-representation, encourage visitors to engage with and relate to the communities on an individual level, and counter stereotypes that depict Natives

as primitive and different. Ultimately the visitors leave the museum better informed. Each year, many visitors walk through this Los Angeles museum and are influenced by the contents of the exhibit and it is unfortunate that the displays have not been updated or replaced to better reflect Native people.

Statement of Research

The creation of the National Museum of the American Indian has drawn attention to the issues surrounding the portrayal of Native Americans in museum exhibits. This has encouraged a discussion among members of the museum and Native American communities that has led to the development of many recommendations. Although many museums have begun to implement these ideas, the change of models takes time and requires effort on the part of all museum departments. One of the original steps taken toward connecting indigenous and museum communities is the consultation of indigenous people at the exhibit planning and creation stages. Soon it became apparent that indigenous consultation is needed at all stages of exhibit creation – from the proposal at the beginning to the final details of the exhibit's setup. Native Americans are needed not just as consultants, but as museum employees where they are part of the preservation and presentation of Native heritage at all stages.

While the museum community may see these changes in consultation and employment on a daily basis, the majority of the public is limited to the material they are exposed to during brief and infrequent museum visits. How effective are exhibitions at demonstrating the existence and importance of the partnership between Native American communities and the museum? One of the most direct ways of presenting this partnership to the public is through the inclusion of Native voices in museum exhibits. This means the exhibit displays go beyond archaeological

and ethnographic information to include Native American interpretations and insight on a level that the public can see. This research will focus on the extent at which permanent museum exhibits in Arizona incorporate Native American voices.

Methods

The research for this paper was completed through library research, museum visits, and correspondence with museum specialists at each of the museums. The background research focused on the history of representing Native Americans in museums and the development of indigenous museums in the last quarter of the twentieth century, with a special emphasis on the National Museum of the American Indian. Three museums within Arizona were selected for case studies – the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, and the Heard Museum in Phoenix. While there are other exceptional museums within Arizona, these were selected because of their location in larger cities, suggesting they are more likely to be visited by residents and tourists. Each of the museums was evaluated based on the exhibit content available to visitors during the spring of 2009. While each museum had multiple exhibits that addressed Native Americans, one exhibit was selected from each museum for the purpose of this research. At the Museum of Northern Arizona, *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau* was examined, an exhibit installed in 1980. The *Paths of Life* exhibit was selected at the Arizona State Museum, which was installed in two parts during the early 1990s. Finally, *Home*, a recently installed exhibit, was examined at the Heard Museum. The display techniques were examined within the three exhibits for evidence of Native American narratives, interpretation, consultation, and other forms of voice. In other words, what techniques are used to suggest that the exhibit provides an accurate representation of its showcased communities?

This research looks at a small sample of museums and therefore cannot provide quantitative data on the presence of Native American voices in museum exhibits. Even within Arizona, there are museums like the Tohono O'odham Cultural Center and Museum that have utilized interesting techniques for representing indigenous communities. On a broader level, this research will not discuss basic museum questions such as how Native American communities can be presented in a way that attracts more visitors to the institution. These areas of research are certainly worth exploring in additional investigations.

Brief History of Representation of Natives by Europeans

From the time reports were first sent back to Europe by European explorers to the present, Native Americans have not been portrayed accurately or compellingly. Instead of recognizing and acknowledging Native Americans as human with societies equal to their own, European explorers began the relationships between Western societies and indigenous peoples with a misrepresentation in which Native Americans were depicted as cannibals, primitive (yet exotic) creatures of nature, and ultimately different (Maurer 2000: 16). Additional encounters with a variety of different communities resulted in the development of representations of Native Americans as noble savages, a neoclassic romantic notion still seen in contemporary art and writings (Maurer 2000: 16). Seen as fierce and stoic, this interpretation of Native American personality came to symbolize the Americas, which were viewed by Western society as uncivilized and exotic, yet attractive, noble, and available.

This bipolar image of Native Americans and of the Americas was fascinating to much of European society. Curiosity cabinets, which were private collections of objects owned by the wealthy elite and viewed as entertaining microcosms of the world, were highly popular

throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As contact with the Americas increased, Native American objects became highly sought after as additions to these collections (Maurer 2000: 19). Another event demonstrating Europe's fascination with Native Americans was the shipment of an entire Brazilian Tupinambá Indian village back to Rouen, France, complete with nearly 50 people and their things in the second half of the sixteenth century. Once in Rouen, the village was recreated and the Tupinambá people provided entertainment for Europeans by demonstrating “Native” activities (Maurer 2000: 18). The Tupinambá, like other Native American groups later, were viewed by Europeans as a fusion of primitive children, needing guidance and instruction, and “wild people,” needing taming (Sandahl 2005: 32). Both the curiosity cabinets and the recreated Tupinambá village demonstrate the Western-interpreted juxtaposition of Native American “barbarity” with European “civilization”.

As the Western world became more industrialized, World Fairs were organized where Western countries could show off their technological developments and advanced culture. With the growing interest in ancient American cultures and “primitive” Native Americans, Native Americans were exhibited alongside showcases of the untamed wilderness of the Americas and reinforced the juxtaposition of Indian savagery with European civility (Maurer 2000: 21). Perhaps one of the most well-known World's Fairs is Chicago's Columbian Exposition in 1893, which celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas.

Visitors could observe and even experience the lives of exotic peoples on the Midway. Recreated environments were popular with visitors, and Native American displays were abundant. Even a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school was built full-scale. The displays of Native American materials were lumped together by region and a single tribe was selected to represent the entire area, within which were many different independent communities. Native

Americans were recruited for visitors' entertainment and education and to serve as guides and demonstrators of their community's arts and crafts in these re-creations. The representation of Native Americans at the Columbian Exposition was problematic not only for its generalization of diverse communities within a perceived region, but also for its display of Native American people as entertainers frozen in the past and from less complex societies (Maurer 2000:22-24). This representation allowed visitors to interpret Native Americans as less evolved, primitive, and of no concern for contemporary society.

It is also important to discuss the display of Native American objects collected during the Columbian Exposition. These objects were often organized into displays by function, with little to no emphasis on their aesthetic or spiritual value (Maurer 2000: 23). Once again, the Western representation of Native Americans provided a foil for the success of Western society. These objects were collected by museums at the conclusion of the fair, providing the foundation for collections at museums like Chicago's Field Museum. Thus there is a direct link between the displays at world fairs and early museum exhibitions on Native American presented to non-Native Americans (Maurer 2000: 23).

Early Representations of Native Americans in Museums

From the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, Native American exhibitions were installed in museums across the United States. Anthropology, art, and science museums all promoted their own interpretations of Native American peoples and cultures, although with no direction or advice provided by the Native Americans themselves. The belief of Western society that Native American communities and cultures would disappear was a driving force behind museum collecting and displays during the early part of the twentieth

century. As a result, many museum exhibitions displayed Native Americans as either in the process of disappearing or having already disappeared (Nason 2000: 38).

In the early part of the twentieth century, exhibitions with titles like the “hall of primitive races” were installed and objects representing a community's identity were displayed without cultural context or direction (Maurer 2000: 24). Dioramas were key features of early exhibitions, attractive because they were perceived as a way to display “essential truths” of the past (Nason 2000: 30). These exhibitions, created using European models, still presented the public with representations of Native Americans as barbaric groups that were readily juxtaposed with Western civilization. At this time, museums and the rest of society were interested in cultural evolution models that placed non-Western groups in a ranked system of development.

Another new interesting exhibit technique used to display Native Americans was used in the Museum of Modern Art's “Indian Art of the United States”, installed during the 1940s. Hundreds of Native American objects were displayed, spanning both spatial and temporal distances. The exhibition display techniques mirrored contemporary displays of modern Western art (Maurer 2000: 25). It is likely that these Native American objects were accepted by avant garde artists as art worthy of replicating because the artifacts were displayed in a Western manner.

Community members were not involved in creating these early exhibitions – the interpretation and design was left to the museum's curators. Because their Western education and training were valued as authoritative, curators were in charge of exhibition decisions, speaking to the public for both the museum and Native American communities (Nason 2000: 29).

More Recent Problems with Native Representation in Museums

Museum exhibits failed to portray Native American voices throughout the majority of the twentieth century. Native American intangible culture and physical objects were often displayed in a manner that diminished the worth of Natives in the eyes of the museum visitor. Historical photographs of Native Americans, which are still commonly found in museum exhibits, symbolize a past era and their presence signals to visitors that by association, Native American people are also of a by-gone era (Nason 2000: 37). Dioramas, a popular exhibit technique that provides a life-sized three-dimensional snapshot into a realm unfamiliar to the visitor, have been heavily relied upon to represent the lives of Native American communities. While individuals enjoy the thrill of peering in on someone else's life (as perhaps indicated by the popularity of today's reality television shows), these dioramas unfortunately have often misrepresented Native Americans. Many dioramas displayed Native Americans as they lived during the last half of the nineteenth century, allowing visitors to interpret these communities as still frozen in the past. Few dioramas provided insight into the contemporary world of Native Americans.

Additional problems with the representation of Native Americans in museum exhibits included the interpretation of material objects. Traditional techniques of display and representation were formatted using a Western historical interpretive framework, and “depreciated the value of memory” that community members possessed (Lubar 1997: 17). Western-trained curators, who were typically viewed as the ultimate authority in interpreting exhibit materials, often viewed objects first according to their use or function, and then occasionally by what the objects represented or meant to the community (Nason 2000: 40). Visitors were rarely if ever exposed to deeper cultural meanings or community interpretations of the objects on display (Maurer 2000: 25). Additionally, objects were often displayed without

acknowledging the role or identity of the individual artist, further distancing visitors from the community by creating a scene of faceless anonymity and allowing a lack of human association (Nason 2000: 38). To the visitor, the treatment of these objects suggested that Native Americans had little cultural complexity, that Native American individuals were not important, and that there is little value in listening to the Native American voice.

Issues with the representation of Native Americans through objects and dioramas paralleled a larger trend in museum representations of Native Americans – the implied discontinuity between a community's past and present. Throughout the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, museum exhibits have painted Native American cultures and communities primarily as “relic[s] of the past,” inadequately demonstrating to visitors the direct link between the origins and history of a community and the present (West 2000: 11). The focus of these exhibits has been primarily on the past, rarely emphasizing or even presenting the contemporary world. Museum displays often represented Native American objects as “hollow” and “static,” neglecting to present the living aspects of the objects that were important to the community (citation needed). Furthermore, this method of display neglected to present the visitor with the living aspects of contemporary Native American communities (Preucel, Williams, and Wierzbowski 2005: 14). This discontinuity between past and present groups negates the survivance of Native American peoples (Nason 2000: 37).

Intentionally or unintentionally, traditional exhibit techniques have presented visitors with misguided information about Native Americans. Museum exhibits have been dominated by Western points of view while neglecting to present Native American knowledge. Western skepticism has established a pattern of questioning the “authenticity” of the memories and viewpoints held by non-Western community members (Archuleta 2008: 183). It was believed

that the views of community members lacked legitimacy, that the “discredited, mistrusted” accounts of community members were not appropriate to include in museum exhibitions (Sandahl 2005: 30). As a result of museums privileging the Western viewpoint and neglecting indigenous perspectives, stereotypes and misinformation have been both legitimized and perpetuated. Disconnecting a community's past and present allows visitors to classify contemporary Native Americans as “discultured, disembodied...and largely irrelevant” (Nason 2000: 40). Failure to adequately present the past is a disservice to both contemporary Native American communities and non-Native visitors (Nason 2000: 39).

Bringing Native Issues to National Attention

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw major movements within the museum community to shift concepts of authority in representing Native Americans. Native American rights were pushed into the mainstream American social and political consciousness during the last quarter of the century, with a significant peak in visibility near the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992. Paralleling this mainstream movement was a push to mesh diverse Native American perspectives with existing museum practices, a complicated and extended task.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was a monumental law passed in 1990 that represents a change in attitude toward the cultural rights and responsibilities of Native Americans (Maurer 2000: 26). NAGPRA requires federal agencies and organizations to repatriate, or return, Native American cultural items and human remains to their respective communities. It symbolizes a shift in the power structure of Western museums from one dominated by Western knowledge to one attempting to balance Native American and Western forms of knowledge and interpretation. Fulfilling NAGPRA

requirements meant that museums had to consult with indigenous people, opening the door to further Native American involvement within museums, including positions as museum consultants, collaborators, employees and directors (West 2000: 11). Recent exhibitions have been developed with various levels of consultation with communities, demonstrating that museums are striving to balance and integrate the control of cultural definitions with communities (Maurer 2000: 15).

In addition to an increase in Native American leadership within mainstream museums, tribal museums, run by Native American communities, have also increased in number over the last part of the twentieth century. Many communities have developed museums and cultural centers that invite both Native American and non-indigenous visitors to learn about the community from a culturally-specific viewpoint. These institutions encourage visitors to explore “another dimension of American culture” traditionally not found in mainstream museums (Clements 2000: 67). Community museums, such as The Warm Springs Museum, Mille Lacs Indian Museum, and Tohono O'odham Cultural Center and Museum encourage community members to actively help preserve and strengthen cultural traditions. Many of these centers recruit tribal members to assist in developing exhibition content, from discussing exhibition layout and content to recording elders speaking about cultural traditions and language preservation (Clements 2000: 69). Tribal museums have included photographs of contemporary community members, which when blown up to life-size emphasize to visitors that Native Americans are real people and therefore deserve respect for their beliefs, values, and communities (Clements 2000: 70). Although these centers are often less-visited than mainstream museums, tribal museums have provided examples of how museums can present the Native American voice in a way that caters to the public, museum, and Native American communities.

While the mainstream museum community has acknowledged the need to improve techniques of representing Native Americans, the methods and degrees of implementation are still being explored. All museums face the issue of how to present visitors with the complex social and historical importance of Native American objects, origins, histories, and contemporary lives. Native Americans should have a prominent position in the conversation about Native peoples. This is beginning to take place in the shift in museum exhibit methods, with the movement toward collaboration with community members (Preucel, Williams, and Wierzbowski 2005: 9). Over the last two decades, museums have worked with Native Americans on issues of representation and interpretation within museum exhibitions. One such area has been the treatment of objects. Historically, objects in archaeology exhibits have often been placed in a model of evolution that leads up to modern inventions, implying that the objects are inferior to modern technology and useful only as items of curiosity. In contrast, many Native Americans view the connections between past objects and the present as important (Ames 2000: 83). Navigating these different interpretations are only part of the negotiations that still take place when developing exhibitions that include consultation with community members.

The early and mid-1990s saw a series of exhibitions installed across the country that featured content developed through consultation with Native Americans. These exhibits exposed visitors to “richer perspectives” on Native American communities and objects from museums' collections (Preucel, Williams, Wierzbowski 2005: 10). Included on this list of progressive exhibitions include the Arizona State Museum's *Paths of Life* exhibit (1992), the Seattle Art Museum's *The Spirit Within* (1995), and the Peabody Essex Museum's *Gifts of the Spirit* (1997). By consulting with members from the communities presented in the exhibits, these museums were able to provide their visitors with a more complex and intimate level of understanding of

Native American communities.

Approaches at NMAI

The creation and implementation of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) was a monumental step toward incorporating Native voices in museum exhibitions. Established in 1989 as part of the Smithsonian Institution, NMAI took over the vast collections of the Museum of the American Indian and began restructuring Native American involvement in mainstream museums. One of the most noticeable differences between NMAI and other museums is that NMAI is run on many levels by Native Americans. In addition to having a Native director, the museum's policies are guided by the voices and perspectives of Native Americans (West 2000: 7). While these policies impact everything from the relationships between the museum and Native American communities to the treatment of collections objects, they are especially influential in exhibit philosophy and practices.

Venturing away from traditional Western techniques of interpretation and display, NMAI exposes multitudes of visitors each year to indigenous perspectives. By replacing traditional techniques with Native American models of knowledge and interpretation, NMAI exhibits challenge traditional museum practices and confront stereotypes produced or legitimized by other “knowledge-producing institutions” (Archuleta 2008: 192). The exhibits displayed at NMAI provide visitors with pictures of Native American communities that challenge traditional images of Natives and question the authority of Western knowledge, which has traditionally dominated museums and privileged written history as the only accurate way to record the past (Archuleta 2008: 194).

In contrast, many NMAI exhibits share information from storytelling and oral history,

authenticating these as valuable techniques of knowledge sharing. Instead of the traditional linear exhibit design, exhibits at NMAI are presented in the form of webs that radiate out but maintain multiple connections with the past, present, and future (Archuleta 2008: 191). This is similar to the way knowledge is imparted in many Native American communities. Another technique NMAI exhibits borrow from storytelling is explicitly saying less in the text panels, while asking visitors to actively participate by reading between the lines to find lessons from the exhibit (Archuleta 2008: 195).

Another theme that shows up in NMAI exhibits is the emphasis on cultural continuity. While many museum exhibits inadvertently disconnected Native American societies on display with contemporary Native communities, NMAI's exhibits emphasize that communities are ever-changing and adaptive. These exhibits acknowledge, and perhaps even emphasize, connections between past Native American societies and contemporary communities. For example, the traditional artifacts many visitors expect to see in a Native American exhibit have been juxtaposed with contemporary Native American art, or the exhibit may present visitors with interpretations of collections objects by Native artists (West 2000: 9). This focus on cultural continuity emphasizes the importance of including Native American voices in interpreting the past, present, and future cultural experiences (West 2000: 8). Acknowledging cultural continuity in museum exhibits highlights the connection between past and present communities, establishing contemporary Native Americans as the descendants of cultures seen in the archaeological record. As descendants of these communities, it follows that Native Americans have an inherent right to provide insight and interpretation in the study of these communities. Museum exhibits should present these interpretations to the public.

In addition to addressing the need to provide Native voice in exhibits, NMAI has sought

to integrate a multiplicity of Native voices into the museum. There are well over 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States alone, meaning a single voice for all indigenous groups in the Americas is nearly impossible. Furthermore, certain tribes have historically received more attention in exhibits and determining which Native voice or voices should be presented in an exhibit is a sensitive debate. In contrast, NMAI has attempted to present numerous voices in their exhibits (Lonetree and Cobb 2008: xiii).

The National Museum of the American Indian has structured itself in a way that reflects indigenous knowledge and values. The ability of NMAI to embody indigenous communities has come from its commitment to Native American involvement and collaboration in all aspects of the museum. Collaboration between museums and Native American communities has the potential to benefit all parties involved – including the Native communities, the museum, and visitors. On a basic level, Native involvement in exhibit design allows a complex presentation of topics, meaning the visitor is exposed to the “subtleties of lived experience” in a way that cannot be created using only outsiders' information and interpretations (West 2000: 11). Collaboration with Native communities is a way to ensure that exhibit topics are presented with accuracy and appropriate cultural sensitivity. In its collaboration with Native communities, NMAI has emphasized forming consensus, accommodating communities, building trust, and working toward a common purpose (West 2000: 12). The museum has involved Native American museum specialists and colleagues and shared the decision-making process in all components of exhibit design, from planning the exhibit to interpreting the exhibit for visitors (Nason 2000: 41). In addition to forming exhibits for the NMAI building in Washington, D.C., NMAI has begun to work with Native American people in their own communities to address issues their tribes face (Gurian 2005: 15). Out of this trend of collaboration is a movement that views museums as

facilitators that provide assistance to Native people in becoming “curators of their own culture,” making sure that they do not direct or displace existing or potential Native leadership (Maurer 2000: 27; Camerena and Morales 2006: 84).

While significant steps have been made in the evolution of representing Native Americans in museum exhibits, there are still issues that must be addressed. Common complaints among non-Native museum curators have been that collaboration with Native Americans and accommodating their requests have limited the power of the curator, diminished the value of the curator's Western education and understanding of museum techniques, and limited what can be selected for presentation in an exhibit (Ames 2000: 73). These complaints indicate that there is work remaining to be done in the development and implementation of collaboration policies.

NMAI Exhibitions

The exhibitions put together for the National Museum of the American Indian's 2004 opening served as a statement to visitors that this museum space was experimental, a new kind of representational space that attempted to go beyond previous museum exhibits. These exhibits signal to visitors that they are in a Native American museum space like they have never seen before (Smith 2008: 138).

Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities was the result of consultation with representatives from eight different Native American communities. Community representatives and museum curators worked to highlight attributes that contribute to the community's sense of identity. Both museum and tribal parties worked toward negotiating a balance of authority in the exhibit's creation and content, ultimately trying to find a way to represent the communities'

voices (Lamar 2008: 144). The end result was a “complex, transitional, and maturing” representation of the communities in which everything from exhibit content to space-allocation was approved by community members (Lamar 2008: 147). While museum staff was involved in the exhibit development process, decisions about exhibit content were approved or vetoed by the community representatives. Even if certain topics may have worked well in the exhibit, the topic was left out if the representatives deemed it inappropriate for display (Lamar 2008: 147). This process of determining what topics were sensitive and which were appropriate to share in the exhibit stirred up debates among people from the same community, further indicating the complexity of exhibit design through collaborative process (Lamar 2008: 157).

NMAI wanted community members' involvement in designing *Our Lives* to be readily apparent to visitors. Exhibit text panels were attributed to specific authors, hiding the many hands involved with the “editorial processes of exhibition design” but symbolizing to the public that Native people have the right to self-interpret and represent their communities (Lamar 2008: 154). In addition to the exhibit's text panels indicating community involvement in exhibit design, the exhibit's media also portrayed the voice of Native Americans. Topics that were too complex for text panels were presented to the public via recorded first-person interviews, providing further indication to the visitor that Native Americans were directly involved with the creation of the exhibit (Lamar 2008: 155).

While not an exhibit in the traditional sense, *Who We Are* is a film that was produced for the opening of NMAI that exposes visitors to Native American voices. Opening in English, the film soon switches over to Native American languages and focuses on several themes that were selected by museum staff as relevant to groups across Native America. Filmmakers then captured various indigenous perspectives, attempting to create a present-day portrait of Native

American communities (Singer 2008: 166-168). The museum originally looked for Native filmmakers to shoot footage for the film, but ended up hiring non-Natives to shoot the majority of the film while commissioning local filmmakers for supplemental footage (Singer 2008: 171). Intended to be one of the first experiences a visitor has at NMAI, *Who We Are* prepares visitors to let go of the Native American stereotypes they may hold going into the museum, open to experience a new representation of Native peoples and contemporary indigenous life (Singer 2008: 170).

It is also worth mentioning the inaugural exhibition *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*. As the title suggests, the exhibit was a way for Native Americans to tell their own histories and perspectives. The exhibit's creators attempt to reverse the anthropological gaze so that it is not just Native Americans who are on display, but also the actions and motivations of colonists and other Western individuals who shaped (often in a harmful way) the state of contemporary Native America (Smith 2008: 138). The exhibit even turns a critical eye on the museum itself by examining the tools of collector George Gustav Heye, out of whose collection NMAI is built (Smith 2008: 140).

Non-Exhibit Features at NMAI

Exhibitions at the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. are only a small percentage of the visitor's experience. In fact, some might complain that the space is inadequately used and more exhibits should be installed. The remainder of the facility is used for hosting public programs and creating an indigenous landscape through architectural features, outdoor gardens, and a cafeteria that specializes in Native foods. Several symposiums have been hosted by the museum that address critical issues

in representing Native Americans. These symposiums and the articles that stem from their discussions are leading the national discussion of how to represent Native Americans, how to collaborate with indigenous groups, and what role Natives should have in the museum community. The events and experiences that NMAI provides beyond exhibits exposes the public to unique and experiential forms of Native identity, values, and voice.

Importance of NMAI on a National Level

While the National Museum of the American Indian was not the first museum to utilize progressive techniques in representing Native American voices, the creation of the museum is important because it symbolizes a readiness at the national level to listen to Native Americans. In a prominent location on the National Mall, the museum announces to the mainstream public the struggles that Native Americans have faced since contact with Western society over 500 years ago, struggles that have evolved into problems contemporary Native communities still face. The museum was given the last open spot on the Mall, indicating that the American government acknowledges the need to include Native American voices in the discussion of American history despite the uncomfortable memories this brings up (Smith 2008: 132). The museum's location on the Mall also demonstrates to the public that NMAI is a place of power, a space to be respected (Archuleta 2008: 200). In this place of empowerment, Native people have a public space for self-representation that signals to the American public that they (and not Western society) are the authorities of their own cultures.

The museum is at the forefront of a shift in epistemological authority, where Western ways of knowledge are beginning to be balanced and even replaced with Native forms of knowledge (Sandahl 2005: 38). On a national level, Native Americans are rejecting the ways

that museums have traditionally treated Native objects, instead treating them as “living entities” and changing the way the objects are handled, interpreted, and displayed (Sandahl 2005: 28). Because of NMAI, museums across the country are beginning to shift their structure from “repositories of past cultures” to “dynamos of new creativity” (McDonald 2005: 41). Since the public perceives museums as authentic knowledge-holding agencies, museums are the perfect facility to use in the international movement to listen to indigenous peoples. The process of changing museum practices begins with the demonstration that new practices are possible and effective. NMAI's policies and institutional structure have encouraged other museums to open their collections to Native Americans, relinquishing sole “ownership” in favor of joint custody or cultural stewardship with tribal communities (Sandahl 2005: 28). Prominent museums, such as the National Museum of American History, are following NMAI's footsteps and acknowledging the validity of indigenous oral history and forms of knowledge (Maurer 2000: 26). The successful empowerment of Native American voices at the Smithsonian, perhaps the most well-respected museum in America, will serve as a catalyst in unsettling traditional museum practices at smaller museums throughout the rest of the country (Sandahl 2005: 37).

Hallmarks of Native Voices

There are many hallmarks of Native American voices that can be found in museum exhibits. These can be as simple as bilingual text panels, where information is relayed in both the indigenous language and English. A direct, and perhaps the most effective hallmark that suggests Native voice is the inclusion of first person narratives. These narratives may appear as written explanations or interpretations penned by a community member, traditional stories and oral histories, or quotations captured in either audio or written format and relayed to visitors.

Exhibits that contain balanced explanations from both museum curators and tribal members and cite the speaker are an effective way to include the Native American voice and demonstrate that indigenous ways of knowing and understanding are equally authentic to their Western counterparts. Exhibits that present stories from the lives of individuals have a powerful impact on visitors, facilitating a connection in the visitor's mind between themselves and the community members. These connections are one of the most powerful ways to encourage the visitor to reconsider previously held stereotypes (Preucel, Williams, and Wierzbowski 2005: 19).

Photographs are another way to document and relay to museum visitors the Native American point of view. When taken by community members, photographs can be a powerful way for indigenous people to capture their own values for sharing with people outside of their community. Photographs are also highly effective in connecting the visitor to the exhibit content – their visual nature creates a tangible connection that can greatly impact the visitor. Photographs can also be used to document the collaborative process of exhibit development, emphasizing the exhibit's shared authority and diverse viewpoints.

Live interpretations are another highly effective way of presenting Native American voices in museum settings. Guided tours or public programs led by indigenous people demonstrate to visitors that the museum is making an effort to listen to Native communities and to present Native voices to the public. Live interpretations by indigenous people, traditional stories, labels written by community members, and photographs are used individually or in combination in many museums to present Native American narratives. What varies among museum exhibits is the level of authority and emphasis these narratives are given.

Museum of Northern Arizona

The Museum of Northern Arizona is a regional museum that focuses on the natural and cultural history of the Colorado Plateau. *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau* is an exhibit that presents visitors with information on the various groups of indigenous peoples that have called the Colorado Plateau home over the past 12,000 years. The exhibition showcases artifacts from the museum's collections and was designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, an international interpretive museum design firm. While *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau* has several hallmarks of Native voice, it is the earliest installed of the three exhibits examined in this research and it noticeably (and understandably) lacks more contemporary and effective techniques of representing Native Americans.

A large plaque at the beginning of *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau* acknowledges the people involved in the creation of the exhibit. No community members are listed as having been consulted or collaborated with during the exhibit's creation. Walking further into the exhibit, the visitor finds the "Orientation Wall," which provides a chronological summary of the characteristics associated with archaeological time periods and social organizations. The chronological nature of this part of the exhibit indicates the exhibit was created with a preference for a Western lineal sense of order. This chronological exhibit style is expected, perhaps even preferred, by most non-Native museum visitors because it fits into the Western way of understanding the world.

While the cultural groups of the Colorado Plateau are displayed in a chronological order, no connection is established between the prehistoric groups and today's Native American communities. Although unintentional, this suggests to visitors that there is cultural discontinuity and fails to demonstrate that today's Native Americans have strong ties to the groups examined

in the archaeological record and therefore have a unique authority to discuss these communities. At the time *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau* was created, it was not standard practice to collaborate with Native American communities in exhibit creation, let alone present exhibit contents from an indigenous point of view. Instead, the exhibit was created using the traditional viewpoint of the museum curator or Western archaeologist, an exhibit technique standard for the era of the exhibit's installation.

Photographs of important archaeological sites are displayed throughout the exhibit, as are pottery and baskets. Toward the middle of the exhibit is a piece of a Hopi mural from Awatovi, and a photograph of the mural being worked on by conservationists. A short background, from a Western archaeologist's viewpoint, is provided on kiva murals of the Southwest. While kiva murals are an interesting and highly discussed topic within Southwest archaeology, a Hopi interpretation or explanation of the mural would have balanced the exhibit content and greatly added to the visitor's overall experience.

Following the archaeology gallery is the ethnology gallery, which provides descriptions of the Native American groups who presently occupy the Colorado Plateau, including the Hopi, Zuni, Navajo and Pai. All of the community descriptions are located in a single gallery space, and provide a survey of the indigenous groups in various degrees of detail. Most of the community panels have at least one quotation from a community member – however the Zuni panel has none while the Hopi has many. Some of the quotations provide Native interpretations of certain activities or objects. It seems that the visitor might connect more with the quotations and exhibit contents if they were provided with a small image of the speaker, encouraging a more intimate connection. Most of the exhibit panels focus on cultural features that the curators appear to have selected as symbolic of each community. At the end of each set of community

panels is a short description or reflection on the contemporary lives (late 1970s) of community members. Later exhibits at other museums follow this layout pattern, but begin to place a larger emphasis on the contemporary lives of community members.

In *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau*, the archaeologist's viewpoint is presented as the ultimate authority with Native American voices as supplemental. Although this pattern of exhibit design was standard for the exhibit's era of installation, it is no longer adequate for presenting Native Americans. The exhibit shows limited signs of Native voice in the inclusion of quotations from community members, signaling an early step toward integrating Native American voices in exhibits.

Paths of Life

Paths of Life: American Indians of the Southwest is a permanent exhibition at the Arizona State Museum that covers Native American communities of Arizona and northwest Mexico. The exhibit covers the origins, history, and contemporary lives of ten groups: the Seri, Tarahumara, Yaqui, O'odham, Colorado River Yumans, Southern Paiute, Pai, Apache, Navajo, and Hopi. Each community has a small sub-gallery within the exhibit where themes unique to their people are presented.

After over ten years of consultation with Native peoples, the exhibition was installed in two segments with the first half mounted in 1992 and the second half in 1993, according to Nancy Parezo (personal correspondence, 2008). *Paths of Life* was created using techniques of representation and exhibit development that were progressive for its time. For the purposes of discussing *Paths of Life*, "contemporary" encompasses roughly the 1980s and very early 1990s.

Both historic and contemporary photographs of community members were used

throughout the gallery, demonstrating the continuity and evolution of traditions. Direct quotations from community members were included in almost all of the sub-galleries. These quotations appeared in text panels, object descriptions, and audibly in videos and sound clips and addressed the exhibit's material and thematic contents. Interspersed with the quotations and curatorial narrative on the exhibit's text panels are excerpts from poems, songs, and creation stories. These quotations, stories, and writings present the community's understanding of their origins and other important facets of their culture.

In addition to text panels and artifacts in displays, *Paths of Life* has several exhibit features that engage visitors in other manners. Life-size dioramas that bring to life thematic elements from the exhibit can be found in the Yaqui, Apache, and Navajo sub-galleries. The dioramas in the Yaqui and Navajo sections include reminders that even though many modern conveniences have been adopted, the fundamental tenets of their communities are still remembered and preserved. Films are also used throughout *Paths of Life* to provide an additional way for visitors to experience the exhibit's contents. Prior to entering the exhibit, visitors are able to watch a short film that shows both historic and contemporary footage of people from the communities in the exhibit. This film serves not only as an introduction to the exhibit, but provides an additional way for visitors to experience the communities and themes addressed in the galleries. Additional films, providing further insight into cultural practices, are found in other parts of the gallery.

On occasion, the Arizona State Museum will invite Native American speakers, artists, and leaders to public programs. These events provide visitors with an immediate demonstration of cultural vitality, a forum for Native topics, and a live version of Native voice. While many of the techniques employed in *Paths of Life* are no longer cutting edge in the museum world, they

were important steps in improving the representation of Native American people. Exhibitions like *Paths of Life* provided alternatives to traditional exhibit development and techniques of representation, offering the framework for the development of progressive indigenous museum exhibits like those found at the National Museum of the American Indian and the Heard Museum.

Heard Museum

The entire Heard Museum in Phoenix is dedicated to the arts and cultures of Native American communities. When considered next to the Museum of Northern Arizona and the Arizona State Museum, the Heard Museum appears to have more resources available for exhibitions and public programs. Additional resources mean that the museum is able to offer its visitors high-quality exhibits that are updated and replaced more frequently, translating into more opportunities for the museum to utilize progressive techniques of representing and collaborating with Native American communities.

While there are currently many exhibits that address Native American communities, for the purposes of this research the exhibition *Home: Native People in the Southwest* will be examined. The installation of *Home* was the result of a \$7.6 million project that included renovation of the gallery space. *Home* highlights vast quantities of objects from the museum's collections in an aesthetically pleasing exhibit style. It is hard to overlook the financial resources that made these rich displays possible as one walks through the exhibit. Visitors are first met by a large art installation done by two Pueblo artists – Tony Jojola (Isleta) and Rosemary Lonewolf (Santa Clara/Tewa). This glass and ceramic installation serves as an early indication to visitors that the rest of the exhibit will place a heavy emphasis on the art and material culture of

showcased communities.

The exhibition is comprised of smaller sub-galleries that feature individual tribes, similar to the organization of *Paths of Life* at the Arizona State Museum. These sub-galleries signify that even though there are common themes across Native American communities, the tribes are ultimately separate entities with unique characteristics that shape their identity. Text panels with quotations from community members that highlight important themes within each community are installed throughout the exhibit. Labels accompanying many of the objects contain descriptions authored by community members. These descriptions represent voices from within the Native American community and demonstrate to visitors that indigenous people hold authority within the museum and that community knowledge is equal to or perhaps more valuable than curatorial interpretation. Poems from the communities were also collected and included in the exhibit.

The unique use of several dioramas in *Home* is also reminiscent of *Paths of Life*. In *Home*, there are dioramas of a Pueblo oven, a Hopi piki room, a Navajo Hogan, and a Yaqui ramada. These life-size representations of distinctly Native American settings create an illusion for visitors of immediate experience. Like in *Paths of Life*, contemporary objects are placed alongside traditional objects demonstrating the continuity, adaptation, and contemporaneity of the community's practices.

In addition to containing textual evidence for consultation with community members, *Home* utilizes multimedia stations to engage the visitor in their learning experience. These small interactive multimedia stations are set up throughout the exhibit and their technology entices visitors to actively explore the stations' topics. An entire room of multimedia activities is placed halfway through the exhibit, creating a break in the visitor's experience by providing a new way

to interact with the exhibit's content. In this room visitors are invited to watch a film titled *Home*, by filmmaker Dustinn Craig (White Mountain Apache), with footage of Native Americans from across the Southwest discussing the importance of land and the concept of home. The presentation of quotations and selections from interviews with Native people not only demonstrates to visitors that Native Americans were involved in creating *Home*, but they also establish Native voice as an authority on indigenous people. This room also invites visitors to browse through Native American newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts that spotlight contemporary Native communities as well as provide visitors with exposure to the voices of numerous contemporary Native Americans.

Guided tours led by Native American interpreters are offered through the *Home* exhibit for museum visitors. While this public program is not part of the exhibit installation, it is demonstrative of the Heard Museum's dedication to presenting Native American communities with a space to share important aspects of their cultures with mainstream society and other indigenous groups. This commitment to providing indigenous peoples with a prominent space for self-representation is similar to the mission adopted by the National Museum of the American Indian.

Discussion

The presence of Native American voices in museum exhibits can be felt in numerous ways which have numerous benefits. Each of the three exhibits that was examined revealed varying degrees of indigenous perspective and community consultation. The earliest exhibit, the Museum of Northern Arizona's *Native Peoples of the Colorado Plateau*, was completed prior the majority of debates that have taken place over Native American representation in museums.

Exhibit curators developed an exhibit that largely reflected Western display practices, however there was an effort to introduce Native narratives into the exhibit. The quotations included in the exhibit indicate that the exhibit curators were interested in providing visitors with Native views in the exhibit contents. Addressing contemporary issues within the communities was also a way that the exhibit demonstrates to visitors that Native people were involved on some level in the exhibit design process.

Over a decade later, *Paths of Life* was installed at the Arizona State Museum and demonstrated significant improvements in the representation of Native American communities. The research and consultation that took over a decade to complete resulted in an exhibit that not only contained quotations from community members and information on contemporary issues, but most importantly asked community members what they wanted to have presented in the exhibit. This type of consultation is not always readily apparent in museum exhibits, but the hallmarks previously discussed are good indicators that some degree of consultation took place during exhibit creation (including quotations and interpretations from community members, oral history, stories, and most directly the acknowledgment of community representatives at the beginning of the exhibit).

While *Paths of Life* utilized progressive techniques of representation for the time of its installation, nearly two decades have passed and the discussion of representing Native Americans has developed even further. With the extensive work coming out of the National Museum of the American Indian, museums across the country have been inspired to improve their exhibits on indigenous communities. For example, the Heard Museum is another institution that has worked toward improving the representation of Native Americans, and its new exhibit *Home* demonstrates many of these improved methods of portraying Native voice. Of the three

exhibits examined for this research, *Home* was most effective and put the most effort into relaying Native voices.

Museums should strive to provide their visitors with multiple layers of information. This means exhibits must present not only varying depths of information, but also multiple viewpoints. When creating an exhibit that features Native Americans, voices from the community should be highlighted rather than curatorial narrative emphasized. The presence of Native voice creates a number of positive results. Native voice can be used to present complex topics and meanings in a manner that only community members (those who have lived the experience) can provide. The presence of Native voices in an exhibit demonstrates the importance of self-interpretation, and on a larger scale, self-determination among previously disempowered communities. Furthermore, Native voice suggests to visitors that the museum, one of the most truthful institutions in Western society, believes that Native voices are a valid authority on indigenous issues and that Native forms of knowledge are equally legitimate as Western forms of knowledge. On a more personal level, narratives from individual community members allow visitors to understand the exhibit on an individual rather than abstract level. When visitors make intimate connections, moving past generalizations about groups they know little about, they are most likely to correct misinformation or shed previously held stereotypes.

Most people within the United States are not used to the concept of a contemporary American Indian. The Indian most of mainstream America has come to know is a generalized composite of a variety of nineteenth century Native Americans. Unfortunately, past museum practices have enabled and supported this representation. Museums are often one of the few places where mainstream Americans experience Native Americans. Because museums are obligated to educate the public and obliged to introduce topics beyond a general summary, the

museum has a responsibility to represent Native Americans and engage the visitor in a manner that counters misrepresentations during the visitor's short visit. In other words, museums should strive to create exhibits that expose and discredit stereotypes. Furthermore, museums should continue to explore how to improve these methods of representing Native Americans and how to better correct visitors' misinformation.

This work on improving the representation of Native Americans and including Native voices in an exhibit can only go so far without the involvement of their communities. During the exhibit development process, it is necessary for a museum to have some degree of contact with community members, usually through consultation or collaboration. In fact – you cannot present Native voices in an exhibit without collaborating with Native peoples. This practice of collaboration is one of the most important issues within today's museum community. Most museum staff and Native Americans would agree that collaboration is important and as a result many museums have adopted policies on collaboration. Where museum and community members do not always agree is in the discussion of individual roles and the depths of the collaborative process. The resistance from museum curators and staff in collaboration indicates that museums need to still work on their collaboration policies and facilitate a discussion where protocols are evaluated by both museum staff and Native Americans. The developments in collaborative discussions must be translated into practices that are visible within the museum and to visitors. Visitors do not often see what goes on behind exhibit development, and the process of involving Native Americans in museums is an important step in self-determination, about which the public should be informed. Therefore exhibits must provide evidence of this collaboration.

In addition to showing visitors the collaboration process, museums must be forthright

with the intentions of their exhibits. If an exhibit has been designed to challenge certain knowledge systems, visitors must be informed of this intention. If an exhibit has been designed in a manner that challenges stereotypes, this should be acknowledged so that visitors are guided in the messages they draw from exhibit contents. Avoiding this direct approach leads to a disparity between the museum's intended discussion and the visitor's experience.

The discussion presented in this research highlights one of the largest conversations taking place within the museum community. A series of advances in the representation of Native Americans have developed over the last three decades, most notably seen in an increased involvement of Native people in museum endeavors. Most, if not all, parties in the museum community agree that collaboration is a crucial step in improving the portrayal of indigenous peoples. One result of this collaborative process has been an increased visibility of Native voice in exhibits, demonstrating to visitors the importance of collaboration and self-representation. This research presents existing developments in indigenous representation and the current stage of collaboration. It is important to acknowledge that we are still in the middle of this process and further advancements must be made in the methods of integrating Native voices into museums at both the exhibit and broader institutional levels.

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