

Why I Can't Visit the National Museum of the American Indian



Reflections of an accidental privileged insider, 1989-1994

I am often asked what I think of the National Museum of the American Indian. That I have nothing to say surprises the people who ask the question because usually they know that I worked for the museum for the first four years of its existence. The fact is, I have never visited the National Museum of the American Indian and declined the invitation to attend the opening. In her "Why I Cannot Read Wallace Stegner" (1996), an essay in a collection by the same name, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn expresses her rejection of Stegner's autobiography *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (1955) and his [*Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*](#) (1954). Cook-Lynn protests the colonial privilege and ideology that inspired Stegner's romanticized view of the American West, with its tragically vanished American Indian. Such works have aided the disappearance of Native people from history. My inability to visit the National Museum of the American Indian stems from a similar sense about its mission and its exhibits. To me, the museum represents a lost opportunity to integrate American Indians into the national consciousness.

"We've been trying to educate the visitors for five hundred years; how long will it take to educate the visitors?" spoke an elderly Native woman at one of

several community-based consultations I organized for the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) between 1989 and 1994. Her words—strong, angry, and impatient—formed a response to the question we carried to each consultation: what should the museum say about Native America? Her agitated comeback affected the remainder of my experience as one of the museum's early planners and has remained with me for the past fourteen or fifteen years. Smithsonian representatives had no response for the woman then; today, the finished museum stands as a reminder of how the small-but-growing museum staff failed to find, in that tense moment of public scolding, inspiration and encouragement to tell the story that we know and the nation denies.

The museum began before the arrival of the director Richard West. Following the passage of the legislation that established the National Museum of the American Indian in late 1989, the secretary of the Smithsonian, Robert McCormick Adams, requested that an internal committee be formed. Undersecretary Dean Anderson headed the internal committee composed of seven to ten staff members, including me, the sole Native to sit on the committee. A number of well-known Native scholars and others sat on the newly formed NMAI board. The internal committee, however, made decisions regarding daily museum work that would begin to shape the character of the museum.

This was a troubling experience for a junior Native staff member. Non-Native persons, save me, were beginning to direct the course of the museum, a development that ran counter to the idea that this was to be the "museum different" (translation: a museum by Indians, not just about Indians). Until this point, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and museums of similar scale with large Native object collections exemplified the colonial practice of taking possession of Native cultural patrimony and human remains and then, without consultation with Native communities, creating exhibits that falsely represented Native people. I looked at the internal committee and wondered, "What's so different here?" and I offered my resignation. The undersecretary asked what would make me stay. My naive and earnest response centered on a plan to take "the suits" from Washington to Indian Country.

We held the first of numerous consultations with Native communities in the summer of 1990 shortly after Secretary Adams's announcement naming Rick West as the museum's founding director.

For the next four years I organized similar consultations throughout the United States from my home in Oklahoma where I had moved to undertake a graduate program in history. The staff in Washington commenced consultations around specific issues such as "traditional care and handling" of objects (March 1992). Much was at stake. Together, the community consultations and topical meetings in Washington informed the architectural program for the Suitland, Maryland, housing facility, which came to hold the Georg Gustav Heye collection of some one million objects of indigenous origin from throughout the Western Hemisphere, then located at 155th and Broadway, in New York City. Reflecting the desire of many Native communities, the Suitland facility was built to

provide an appropriate home for tribal cultural patrimony and religious objects. The building's design was informed by the expertise of numerous Native scholars and cultural practitioners educated in the history, purpose, and care of tribal objects. The Philadelphia-based architectural firm Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates translated the direction they received from Native consultants into an architectural plan for a structure worthy of some of the most precious of Native cultural and religious material objects.

The work of coordinating consultations provided a window into the formative years of the National Museum of the American Indian, a period during which the new director assumed his duties. This was also the period during which the museum hired most of its staff and developed its unique institutional culture. In hindsight, red flags were everywhere, and I have since come to question whether Native people should ever look to the state for solutions to the destructive outcomes of colonialism and hegemony.

To a large extent white staff were in charge of the real nitty-gritty stuff like budgets, administration, exhibition coordination, and publication. Indians, mainly male, were in charge of translating and defining Indianness, which, in addition to contributing to planning for the Suitland collection facility, also informed exhibition content, community relations, public programming, and museum policies. The division of work along white and red lines was especially significant in the area of exhibition development. Until 2001 when Jim Volkert, a non-Native, stepped down to assume other responsibilities, he had acted as project coordinator and had final approval of all exhibitions. Each exhibition was planned by a team that included a Native curator. This early absence of Native control challenged the promises implicit in the language of the "museum different."

The racialized and gendered division of labor required multiple translations between team coordinator and Native curator. The NMAI project coordinator's role required command of the curator's language: tribal cultural language, Native pedagogical practices, and Native epistemologies. In addition, the coordinator, and if not the coordinator then the curator, needed to successfully translate Native ways of knowing and practicing to people unfamiliar with the Native world and its history. The absence of Native knowledge and the consequent inability to effect the required translation undermined exhibitions. Were the principal players held accountable? Not so much in the early days, which might help explain the disastrous opening. From my observations, exhibition team members were accountable to a project coordinator, who knew nothing about Native history and culture. He was dependent on the smattering of selected Native men, and few women, for his view of Native America. Lacking cultural knowledge and capital, he consequently lacked the authority to hold curators and others accountable or even to lead effectively. His important contribution was limited to creating a productive division of labor within the team.

Until recently the museum has been awash in money. Travel, meals, consultation,

research, and more travel filled the exhibition team's calendar. Consultants were flown to Washington and paid for their services. Money bought much information and advice through contractual consultation, but it was also a corrupting and distracting force, more so without stringent accountability. Amazingly, a few very hardworking staff members resisted the party and imposed accountability on themselves—both for how they used the museum's money and how they understood its mission. Too few staff members followed suit. I look back at them now with great admiration and appreciation.

The dominant presence of male Native artists in the early museum years has left a lasting stamp on the museum's work environment and on its exhibitions. Art and material culture were the preferred media for transferring knowledge about Native America to an unknowing audience. Why art and culture? For many artists, Native creative expression is a presumed window on Native inner life and culture. The exhibit teams have thus relied on art and material culture, the ultimate expressions of Native inner life, as a vehicle for teaching unfamiliar visitors about Indianness. But such thinking represented precisely the problem with the museum: it had become an elite enclave, divorced from the reality of most Native people, where explaining Indians to museum visitors assumed primacy. Moreover, the museum early on made the decision that it would eschew the historical context from which modern Native America has sprung. This meant, astonishingly, no treatment of the history of genocide and colonialism, then and now, or even of the basis of tribal sovereignty.

Jolene Rickard, an NMAI contractor, is quoted as saying, "There are other places where you can learn the exact dates of the Trail of Tears. It's less important to me that someone leave this museum knowing all about Wounded Knee than that they leave knowing what it takes to survive that kind of tragedy." As much as I admire Jolene Rickard for her artistic achievements, I wince at her easy dismissal of historical context as an essential prerequisite for understanding "what it takes to survive that kind of tragedy." Rickard's statement reflects the "group think" of the NMAI as conceived by the director—what I call, "There will be no unhappy history here."

Rickard's statement also suggests that the museum's senior and curatorial staff imagine that destruction and colonialism have ended. Just as nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists froze authentic Native people in exhibitions while Indians starved on reservations, the museum's staff has created a modern hermetically sealed Native "community" that has "survived" something long passed. This distancing, forgetting, and desire to divert the public's gaze from the past simply perpetuates the on-going erasure of authentic Native histories.

Experience, personal and otherwise, has shown me that it is not just white Americans who need to grasp the full scope of Native history. Native people can also benefit from a more just and accurate depiction of their past. No one can understand the experience of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Indians without understanding the U.S. laws and policies that radically reshaped their

lives. In my mind's eye, I see an image of a river (federal Indian policy and law) fed by many streams that shape the flow and form of the river: colonial-era treaties; the U.S. Constitution; early nineteenth-century Trade and Intercourse Acts; the Indian Removal Act; ex parte Crow Dog, which clearly and unambiguously acknowledged Native sovereignty; and the legislative assault on tribal sovereignty in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Through it all, Native people fought back against the Americans' assault on the American Indian. They fought in Washington; they fought from the reservation; they fought through hired lawyers; and they fought in the courts, all the while preserving much of what the United States had relentlessly tried to destroy. This is more than mere "survivance"; it is productive, structured, and structuring struggle that kept Native people from extinction.

The river is shaped by the actions of ancestral and modern men and women, tribal leaders and Indian activists who resisted removal, resisted allotment, maintained tribal social values and culture, overturned termination, and who continue to fight to this very day to protect tribal sovereignty. Much is at stake: reserved treaty rights for hunting, fishing, and gathering; the trust responsibility that binds the United States to its obligations to Native people as stipulated in treaties and court decisions; and treaties themselves, the Maginot Line for indigenous peoples who have been swept up under the American state umbrella. Native people continue to fight the genocidal policies of the United States government and the equally destructive practices of the private sector. Native lands contain the highest concentrations of toxic waste anywhere in the United States. Devastated Native economies, which never recovered from forced migrations and other government-imposed dislocations, leave numerous tribes with few economic options beyond the very unhealthy ones of selling toxic dumping permits to the government and to private companies.

Toxic waste is, of course, not the only health problem Native peoples face. Native women are raped and murdered by white males at a rate higher than any other racial or ethnic female population. A part of the explanation for non-prosecution of such crimes goes back to the Federal Major Crimes Act of 1883, which extended federal authority over Indian lands in cases of major crimes, including rape. Because U.S. prosecutors fail to pursue white perpetrators and tribal authorities have no jurisdiction in such cases, the criminal goes unpunished. It seems likely that such injustices have contributed to the high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction in the Native population. Diabetes, which attacks a higher percentage of the Native population, had its genesis in the destruction of Native economies and diet and the introduction of rations. For example, Plains people subsisted on buffalo meat and the meat of other ungulates, small game, and hundreds of plant sources for nuts, fruits, berries, legumes, tubers, and teas. The extermination of the buffalo, the appropriation of Native lands, the collapse of indigenous trade, and the introduction of government rations of lard, bacon, coffee, sugar, corn, rice, and poor beef radically changed the Indians' diet. Rations were insufficient, irregularly delivered, and frequently unusable either because they were spoiled or because they were unfamiliar to the Indians.

For Native people, especially young people, these trials, and the changes they produced, explain their world today, whether they live on reservations or have dispersed to cities with their families. This knowledge can be a source for recovery from a historic wound. It can also publicly affirm the experiences of younger generations of Natives and inspire them to follow their elders into activism and community leadership.

The importance of historical context to the stated mission of the NMAI had been raised in at least one community consultation. A Lakota man noted that Native ways of life have not been respected since the late nineteenth century. He called for creating a “better environment for our people because the way history books are written and the way we feel when you go to different places[, is] that we need to create a better environment, update our history. There are some things that cannot change our ceremonies, but we change the way we live.” What non-Natives see of Indians, in other words, are inauthentic and degraded people. Why? Because actual Natives do not uphold non-Natives’ crude nineteenth-century understanding of Native culture. This, too, is a form of colonial thought and ideology that is destructive to Native people but that can be corrected.

Native communities and individuals have emerged today from long struggles with the destructive consequences of American hegemony. The Chickasaw Nation, located at Ada, Oklahoma, is a shining example of a tribal success story. As one of the removed southeastern tribes in the early nineteenth century, the Chickasaws rebuilt their lives in Indian Territory only to lose land to other relocated Indian tribes. The tribe also lost lands as a result of the Curtis Act (1908), which brought about allotment (the federal government’s program to distribute reservation lands to individual Native landholders) to the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma. The Chickasaws use casino proceeds to benefit the people in the form of a wellness center, counseling center, library, scholarships, an aviation and science summer academy, and rebuilt stomp grounds (for an annual green corn dance). The Chickasaw Nation is also promoting the increase of scholarship about Chickasaws and is funding a project to carry out that mission under the direction of a Chickasaw scholar. Governor Bill Anoatubby, who has led the Chickasaws for many years, embraces a forward-looking vision for the tribe and extends the tribe’s friendship, services, and resources to the town of Ada.

Cherokee professor Andrea Smith, University of Michigan, is an example of a Native academic who seeks to bridge her activism and her academic work. Her recent book, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, broadens the meaning of colonial sexual violence to boarding school experience and rape and pollution of the land. In addition to being a central focus of her scholarly work, sexual violence against Native women is also an area of her activism. *Conquest* draws from Smith’s activism through the creation of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, a national grassroots organization. She is one of a growing number of Native scholars who address the continuing consequences of U.S. internal colonialism and who are bringing international attention to

U.S. indigenous issues. Her activism, along with that of Sarah Deer, a Muskogee lawyer and activist from Minneapolis, is the reason Amnesty International began studying violence against Native women in the United States. That work resulted in a stunning and highly disturbing report about the abuse of Native American women. The successes of the Chickasaw Nation, the devoted activism and scholarship of Andrea Smith, and the ongoing work of community-based activists are also Native America.

As a professor of history who teaches the history of Native North America and federal Indian policy and law at a midwestern University, I am frequently reminded of the depths of non-Native ignorance of Native America. Questions I pose in class might go something like this: What do you know about American Indians? Silence. Do you know any American Indians? Heads shake from side to side. What do you think a reservation is? The discussion picks up. "It's where the Indians live." Why? How did they come to live there? "They just live there." Why? "So they can be together." But why do they live at that particular place? "They just picked that place because they liked it or because it was away from the white people." By the end of the semester, students have become fascinated with this destructive history and how it worked. I have delivered on my promise that a semester studying American internal colonialism and federal Indian law and policy will be like a trip to Mars. At the end of each semester a student will inevitably ask, "Why didn't they [parents and teachers] tell us this stuff." I remind them of the first day of class when I told them that if they were seriously wedded to the fictional national narrative, they might not be happy with my class. At semester's end, they know what I mean by a fictional national narrative. I tell them that people will take extreme measures to protect and preserve it. And each semester, in that moment, some of my students and I experience reconciliation.

I wish I were confident that visitors to the NMAI experienced a similar sort of reconciliation. But reconciliation cannot happen in a vacuum. One must know the history before reconciliation can occur. Yes, the previous five hundred years represent but a brief moment in the long history of indigenous occupation of this land, as Rick West likes to point out. But those five hundred years have radically changed Native America for all time. The NMAI imparts no understanding by ignoring those five hundred years but only reinforces the invisibility of Native people and replicates practices of the Department of Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the academy. What else but willful ignorance can explain the continued existence of a sports team with a name like Redskins? or of romanticized movies like *Dances with Wolves*? Where do we find reconciliation in the midst of such denigration? Can we find reconciliation in a state institution?

For me, the National Museum of the American Indian represents a broken promise, no less consequential than the many broken treaty promises made by the United States to Native people. It represents a betrayal of our trust that this museum would be the Natives' museum. In place of the stories of the Native past, it focuses on arts, culture, and commerce—the stuff of commodification. To

paraphrase the historian Paul Kramer, cultural recognition and power do not connect. Sitting there in close proximity to the Capitol, one might think that the Indians were finally within reach of social justice, political power, and economic change. Not yet. Cultural recognition will not create a working arena where Native America might engage the United States government on something resembling level ground. Rather, cultural recognition is a distraction for Native people, a painless amusement for non-Natives, and a way for U.S. government politicians and bureaucrats to avoid the hard questions raised by the history of U.S. internal colonialism.

Further Reading:

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's essays can be found in *Why I Cannot Read Wallace Stegner* (Madison, Wisc.. 1996). Jolene Rickard is quoted in Amy Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI," *American Indian Quarterly* (2006). Some of the Chickasaw tribe's projects can be seen on the [tribal Website](#). Andrea Smith's book is *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005). Sarah Deer works for [the Tribal Law and Policy Institute in Minneapolis](#). Learn more about the institute and access numerous reference sources at its Website. The Amnesty International report mentioned above is titled "[Maze of Injustice: The failure to protect Indigenous women from sexual violence in the USA](#)," Amnesty International, April 24, 2007.

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