

Book Review:

The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations

Reviewed by Deana Dartt-Newton

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The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations. Edited by Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb. University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 475 pages. \$29.95 Paperback

Approaching its sixth year on the Mall, the National Museum of the American Indian has been a site of overwhelming debate. Upon opening, the NMAI's exhibitions were harshly criticized as "ahistorical" and "abstract" and have received mixed reviews since. The verdict is still out, even among Native American scholars, whether the NMAI is fulfilling its mandate of representing "all indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere"—an enormous and perhaps impossible feat. The important scholarly discussion that ensued in those first months and years of opening has been captured in the 2008 volume *The NMAI: Critical Conversations*, edited by Amy Lonetree and Amanda Cobb. Lonetree and Cobb initially collected some of the essays from leading museum scholars on both sides of the debate for two special volumes of *American Indian Quarterly*. For the edited volume they assembled those and other submissions to be read in dialogue with one another, some extolling the virtues of the NMAI, others critiquing it.

To begin, the first three rather neutral contextual essays, by Ira Jacknis, Patricia Pierce Erikson, and Judith Ostrowitz orient the reader to the history of the George Gustav Heye (1874–1957) collection and the process of establishing a Native place on the National Mall. The largest of its kind in the world, the collection consists of over one million objects from indigenous peoples from the Western Hemisphere, collected over a period of 45 years. These three contributions combined allow the reader to engage with the more critical material that follows. These essays provide necessary background context for the argument about whether the NMAI effectively engages and educates the public through its interpretive spaces.

The Critics

Responding critically is Lonetree herself—who doesn't hold back, suggesting that the NMAI has missed the opportunity to educate the world about the crimes against Native American communities, its public narrative moving too quickly into a sense of reconciliation. She asserts that the abstract categories through which the exhibitions portray Native life are in danger of being misinterpreted or "hijacked" and infused with misinformation and stereotypes. Sonya Atalay agrees, stating that there is "No sense of the Struggle" and that to celebrate survival and really understand "survival," the public must understand the magnitude of what has been lost. Pauline Wakeman's essay explores how the "Procession of Nations" which opened the museum in 2004 was a performance of reconciliation, symbolizing to millions of spectators the illusion that the struggles Native people have endured are now behind them. And Robin Maria DeLugan asserts that while the NMAI may explore the relationship between American Indians and the U.S., albeit vaguely, the exhibitions essentially ignore the contested relationships between the nation-states in Latin America and the indigenous people of Mexico, Central and South America. Like others, she suggests that it is unrealistic to represent such a vast number of cultures in one place.

The Supporters

Supporters of the inaugural exhibitions include co-editor Amanda Cobb, who states that the NMAI represents the true reconciliation that until now has eluded American History. Paul Chaat Smith, curator of the *Our Peoples* exhibition, offers valuable insights into the development of the narrative of *Our Peoples* and allows us a glimpse of the complex, even contradictory nature of the process of telling such a rich, yet devastating history: while

in many ways it is a story of resistance and revitalization, it was important that he and co-curator Jolene Rickard “avoid all attempts to find silver linings.” Elizabeth Archuleta contends that the exhibitions which have been criticized for their vagueness were not meant to educate through direct assertions of “truths” but intended to educate much like Native elders convey information, in subtle and layered storytelling. She and others suggest that a Native museum should indeed have significant epistemological differences that may not be easily discerned by non-Native visitors.

Complex Issues Addressed

While several essays mention the process of consultation for exhibition development, one addresses it specifically. Cynthia Lamar’s essay calls for more transparency about the process of community curation. Lamar states that though the collaborative process of developing a narrative in tandem with Indian community members was one of the aspects of planning at the NMAI that holds it somewhat apart from other non-tribally owned institutions, the exhibitions do not describe this process.

The value of this volume is immense. As a reader in American Indian Studies, Museology, Art History, and Anthropology courses it offers a balanced assessment of the inaugural exhibitions, including contributions by members of the curatorial and exhibition teams. It addresses the limitations and complications of representing diverse communities, and demonstrates that even with the most intense consultation with stakeholders, there will always be those who object to the story you’ve told. With strong representation from Native scholars this volume offers perspectives not otherwise heard in mainstream museological debates. An essential component to analysis

of exhibitions with Native American content, these insights offer the non-Native museum professional alternatives to a dominant expression of Native histories, namely chronological, linear narratives. Also western in nature are exhibitions that are overtly explanatory and dominated by a curatorial voice. Several of the contributors to *Critical Conversations* draw attention to the expectation by the museological community that the NMAI’s exhibitions conform to these canons. The necessity of a scholarly dialogue about the museum is indisputable, and the collection of essays offers direction for future exhibition development, not only at the NMAI, but perhaps for Tribal museums as well. For non-Native professionals it calls into question the unexamined assumptions about telling Native histories and representing Native cultures in a public sphere.

More Discussion of NMAI’s Programs Needed

The volume’s shortcomings are few, but should be assessed here, with the caveat that we all recognize this is but a beginning in what is sure to be a long continued conversation. Probably the most exciting aspect of the NMAI is its programs for connecting with its representative communities, providing training for Tribal museum personnel, web based educational materials for teachers, on-site workshops from language to weaving, and on-line exhibitions. This extensive campaign of outreach to Tribal communities is so central to the NMAI’s goals that it is called the “fourth museum.” *Critical Conversations* over-emphasizes exhibition spaces which are really a small part of the museum’s mandate (and only 30% of the space) and lacks a discussion of the extensive public programs. The next volume should also take on the question of how to really decentralize museum authority and whether a National

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(continued from page 97)

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Museum can ever achieve such a goal. Further, such a volume could examine whether this venue and its audience is ready for complex epistemological approaches to Native American history, or if a more direct approach is necessary to educate its largely non-Native visitorship.

Another set of issues which Chad Smith's essay addresses, but which could be further explored is the complexity and often inequitable process of consultation-for-collaboration. Building on that, another potential starting point for dialogue might be how the popular assumption that all leadership positions at the NMAI were/are held by Native people colors what the public expects.

A Rich Resource for Dialogue

Signaling a National affinity, the NMAI by its nature on the Mall stands as a symbol of both conquest and reconciliation. Still, the NMAI has proven in these initial years to be a site for activism, and a space in the otherwise alienating Washington, D.C. for Native people to feel at home and to speak their minds. Within its walls, Native docents tell the histories of Native peoples and an indigenous cuisine is offered at the museum café. Outside its walls,

on university campuses students are engaging in debate over whether the NMAI is a site for revitalization and rebirth or another gesture toward placating America's Indians. There seem to be no easy answers to this question.

I use the book in my American Indian Studies courses at the University of Washington and would be at a complete loss without it when discussing Native American representation. The volume evokes class discussions such as: who has authority to speak for "others;" can a representative voice be achieved through a consultation process; and, is it possible to represent diverse cultures in one place without diluting their complexity and promoting stereotypes? The book enables students to explore why the NMAI is contested ground, and illustrates that even Native people disagree about the Museum's usefulness. As the twenty-four community-curated exhibits rotate out and new communities are represented, as new temporary exhibitions are installed, and under new leadership—the flavor of the NMAI is bound to change. *Critical Conversations* is a vital and necessary beginning to the rich scholarly dialogue that is sure to continue. ✨