

## The Construction of Native Voice at the National Museum of the American Indian

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In September of 2004 the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)—the newest and last Smithsonian museum to be built on the National Mall in Washington DC—presented its inaugural exhibitions to the public. The NMAI is described as, “the culmination of nearly 15 years of planning and collaboration with tribal communities from across the hemisphere.”<sup>1</sup> According to Richard West, the founding director of the NMAI, “From the start, our new museum has been dedicated to a fresh and, some would say, radically different approach to museum exhibitions. To put it in the most basic way, we insist that the *authentic Native voice and perspective* guide all our policies, including, of course, our exhibition philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not only “Native voice” that is being presented by the museum, it is a more “authentic” representation. Similarly, Ruth Phillips explains, “what collaborative exhibits seek, in contrast to those they replace, are more accurate translations.”<sup>3</sup>

The quintessential collaboration of the NMAI is its community-curated exhibits, in which NMAI staff members work closely with Native communities to develop the content of the galleries. Native community members were most involved in the development of exhibit themes, exhibit label text, and video interviews. This is evidenced in the exhibits through authored text; for example, on general introductory panels, text is attributed to Chicago cocurators as a group. For specific quotations, a person’s name and his or her tribal affiliation are displayed (figure 9).

I would argue that the NMAI’s identity resides in this collaborative process and authored representations. It is the community curators’ faces

and words on the walls, their knowledge and consent to be on display, that gives the museum its legitimization as a Native museum, one which ethically presents Native voice. In essence, their contributions give what many visitors seek: its “authenticity.”

In this paper, I address the construction of “Native voice” within the NMAI through a focus on “community curating” (or collaborative exhibit making) museum representational strategies; and the changing relations between the subjects and objects presented in museum exhibitions.<sup>4</sup> There are two moments represented in this account: the first part is based on an essay that was written in 2003 in anticipation of the opening of the NMAI, while the latter portion is based on an essay that was written in reflection two years after the museum opening, in 2006.

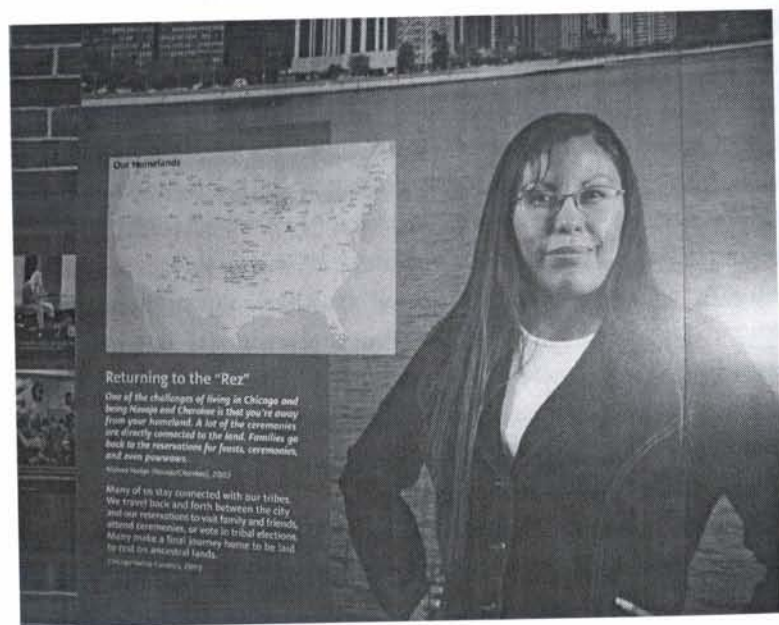
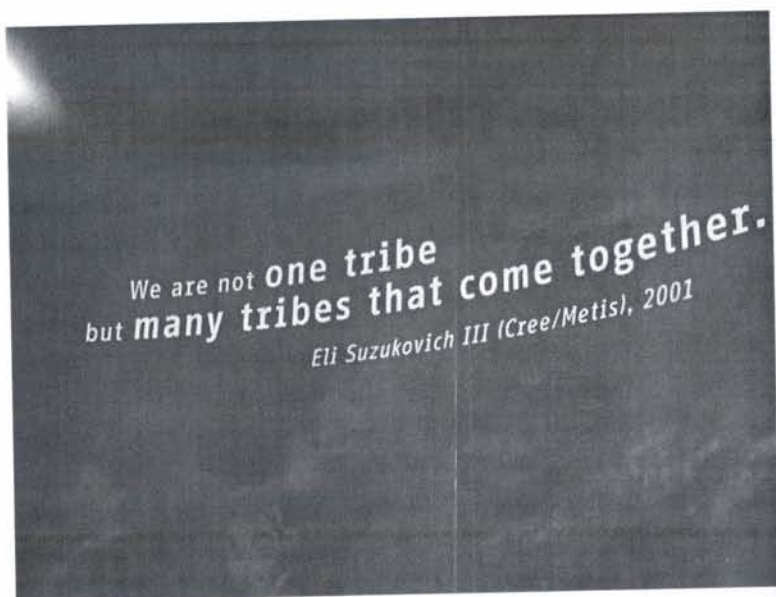
While I begin by examining evidence of Native voice in the exhibit text, after conducting my fieldwork I shift to a form of evidence that was explicitly *not* in the text.<sup>5</sup> In other words, I move from the construction of Native voice as evidenced in material signs and toward an understanding that it must also entail social commitment and advocacy.

### Anticipation

In its rhetoric, the NMAI promises innovations in exhibit technology and ideology. One advertisement reads, “Any museum can invite you to look. A great one changes the way you see.”<sup>6</sup> In *Native America Collected*, Margaret Dubin explains that “visitors need museums to validate their own experiences, to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the world, and demonstrate proper ways of appreciating and understanding objects and events.”<sup>7</sup> One of the goals of the NMAI is to fill in the gaps left by popular, inaccurate stereotypes of Native Americans through “authentic” representations of Native peoples. A loaded word, *authenticity* is one of the explicit promises of the museum.<sup>8</sup>

The construction of Native voice, and the NMAI’s claim to authenticity, is substantiated both implicitly and explicitly through the work of uniquely embedded ethnographic text within the exhibit and the larger structure of the museum itself. In other words, the use of ethnographic evidence, specifically text derived from transcriptions of discourse, effects and is presented as authentic and authoritative cultural representation.





9. Part of the Chicago community exhibit panels in the NMAI Our Lives gallery, 2004. Photo courtesy Jennifer Shannon.

## Native Voice in the New Museum

In *Museums, the Public, and Anthropology*, Michael Ames asks, "Are museums or anthropology really necessary anymore?"<sup>9</sup> The fact that Ames posed this question as a chapter heading in what is now considered to be a seminal work on the anthropology in museums and that it remained as a sign of the times in his later, revised compilation illustrates the real sense of unease in the discipline at that time.<sup>10</sup> Issues of representation, transparency, and authority in ethnography came under intense scrutiny in the 1980s, precipitating what has become known as the "crisis in representation."<sup>11</sup> The sheer amount of published, reflexive materials on the Smithsonian Institution by the Smithsonian regarding representation and collection issues since 1990 shows a similar trend in the field of museum studies.<sup>12</sup> It is during this time period, in 1989, that the Museum of the American Indian was incorporated into the Smithsonian Institution as the NMAI.

Ethnographic museums are seriously implicated by this critique or "crisis," as their main function is the representation of cultures or cultural products.<sup>13</sup> What, then, has been the museum response to this crisis? In *Reflections of a Cultural Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*, Richard Kurin provides a table entitled "What's In, What's Out" that offers some general insights. For example, "collectors" become "stewards," and "monologue" becomes "multilogue." However, in a list of some twenty-two museum features to be changed, the only one to remain the same, as an "institutional product," was "authenticity."<sup>14</sup>

Dubin suggests two specific responses that museums have made to the crisis: historical revision and change in exhibition-making practices to incorporate better communication between Natives and non-Natives.<sup>15</sup> She explains, "Ideally, the new museology demands a total overhaul of museum theory and practice. The primary goal is to open up space—discursive space as well as physical space—for indigenous objects to become speaking subjects who voice their own ideas and continue to (or even seize control of) their own representations."<sup>16</sup> The rhetoric and methodology of the NMAI suggests that it is a quintessential "new museum"; its mission statement focuses on "consultation, collaboration and cooperation with Natives."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, its Web site states that the NMAI "empower[s]



the Indian voice" and "actively strives to find new approaches to the study and representation of the history, materials, and cultures of Native peoples."<sup>18</sup>

Based on this mission, the 2004 inaugural exhibition of the NMAI included three permanent galleries—Our Universes, Our Peoples, and Our Lives—that each present eight communities reflecting on their own cosmologies, histories, and contemporary identities, respectively. The communities are represented as localities, rather than cultures, which is another response to the critiques of representation in cultural anthropology. For example, rather than an exhibit about Inuit identity, it is about the identity of the Inuit community of Igloodik, a town in the eastern Canadian Arctic.

In addition to addressing the crisis in representation, there are also visitor expectations that museums, as public institutions, must consider. They are expected to entertain and educate and to be authoritative and aesthetically pleasing.<sup>19</sup> These expectations invoke a number of different knowledge practices that come together in the making of a museum exhibit, including curatorial, design, marketing, and Native knowledge practices. These might include such materials as transcribed text, lighting effects, visitor polls, or instructions for how to properly display a pipe. It is the transcribed text, the ethnographic product of NMAI curatorial knowledge practices, on which I focus here through the examples of the Our Lives gallery.

#### Accessing Native Voice through Community Curating

Community curating is the method through which the NMAI constructs "Native voice." The Our Lives Native community cocurator committees were organized in various ways, depending on the community's preferences, and included between four and ten people. For example, the American Indian community of Chicago selected cocurators through nomination and election, a familiar process for them. For the Kalinago on the Caribbean island of Dominica, the chief of the Carib Territory selected the cocurator committee, making sure there was representation from each hamlet; for both males and females; and with basket makers, farmers, political figures, and cultural leaders.

The process of community curating for Our Lives, and for the inaugural exhibitions in general, was unique in that the NMAI curators spent a

significant amount of time in each Native community, rather than only bringing the community members to the museum for consultation. There were regular meetings between the NMAI curators and the cocurator committees over the course of several years. For example, in Chicago, first there was an introductory meeting to invite the Chicago American Indian community to participate in the exhibition.<sup>20</sup> Once the community agreed to participate, periodic meetings between the NMAI staff and selected cocurators began.

These cocurator meetings were recorded, and the dialogue from these discussions as well as individual interviews with cocurators and other community members became the text of the exhibit. This process of visiting in the community, recording discourse, and talking with people about their life experience is what I refer to as ethnographic practice. In the first meetings, the NMAI curator listened to the cocurators as they began to formulate what it means to be a member of the American Indian community of Chicago today—for instance, activities like powwows that bring them together, community gathering places like the Anawim Center and the American Indian Center, and the various ways in which they maintain their Indian identity in the midst of a large metropolis. The cocurators' emphasis was that the Chicago community was a multiracial and a widely diverse group of people. The NMAI curator listened and returned to the community with themes that represented the various issues that were discussed. The cocurators then helped to further define these themes.

Then the cocurators selected objects from within the NMAI collection as well as from their own community to represent these themes. The cocurators were later visited by a design team contracted by the NMAI and discussed their visions for presentation and reviewed the design team's sketches and layouts of the exhibit. An NMAI media team also visited the community later in the process, interviewing community members on video and recording important events during the week they were there, such as a powwow and a graduation ceremony. At each stage, people working on the exhibit came to the community to talk with community members, get a sense of place, and better represent them in the museum. Once there was agreement on the main themes of the exhibit, cocurators selected (or the NMAI curator commissioned) illustrative objects for the display.



## Native Voice and the Shift to Narrative

The changing relations between subjects and objects within museums and an increasing incorporation of ethnographic text and practice reveal what I see as a shift in focus from objects to subjects and a consequent shift in the locus of authenticity. The Smithsonian's original and continuing mission, since the bequest of James Smithson in 1829, has been for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge." The original interpretation of this mission was to record and display for posterity dying Indian cultures that were becoming acculturated.<sup>21</sup> These early displays, exemplified by an exhibit labeled circa 1925 at the Museum of the American Indian, consisted of objects that were grouped together by type in glass cases, or in what I call object-to-object relations<sup>22</sup> (figure 10). These kinds of displays were closely tied to evolutionary and diffusionist theories in anthropology.

In the late nineteenth century, Franz Boas's notion of cultural groups and cultural relativism became influential in the field of anthropology. This approach focused on how objects are used and included cultural context (for example, through dioramas) to access the meaning of the object according to the people from whom it originated. The culture-area concept was thus developed at the Smithsonian as a means of classifying museum objects in order to better research and exhibit similarity and difference in the Smithsonian's extensive collections.<sup>23</sup> With this innovation in classification, objects at the Smithsonian were situated in a cultural context, in relation to subjects rather than simply to other objects, or what I call an object-to-subject relation.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the labels changed. For example, the object no longer is (only) an Eskimo oil lamp made of stone (and situated among similarly *functioning* objects), but it is (also) a stone oil lamp made by the grandfather of A. Ivalu in 1895 and used in the Return of the Sun Festival (and situated with clothing and items associated with that festival).

One example of a step further toward a Native point of view—though still maintaining the object-to-subject relation, where the object remains the focal point and is accompanied by a Native person's narrative—is the 1991 All Roads Are Good exhibit at the NMAI in New York. In this exhibition, "twenty-three Native Americans from throughout the Western Hemisphere—singers, storytellers, artists, elders, and scholars—were in-

vited to select objects from the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian . . . and talk about the reasons behind their choices."<sup>25</sup>

Three years later, the NMAI presented the exhibit *Creation's Journey*, which was described as one of the "most elaborate attempts at multivocality to date," presenting displays of each object accompanied by explanatory texts grouped into the authorial categories of "art historian," "anthropologist," and "Native." It was a "curatorial experiment of monumental scale" that was "in tune to the sensitive political environment as well as the challenging postmodern aesthetic."<sup>26</sup> Jim Volkert, former head of the NMAI Exhibits Department, explains the experimental nature of this exhibit:

the way that museums present information affects the way you perceive it. . . . So, for example, we had three of those famous decoys from Nevada. One was presented as if it were a piece of art. One was presented . . . in the way that it was discovered in the cave, as a piece of archaeology. And one was presented as if the duck, the decoy, were being used

10. View of First Floor East Hall, Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 155th and Broadway, New York NY, February 1956. Photo by Carmelo Guadagno. Courtesy NMAI Photo Archives. N28310.





floating in a creek, as a piece of natural history. And they were all set right side by side, that *same* object, in three different displays. And so you understood intuitively and immediately that the way the museum presents something affects how you perceive it. It's art, it's natural history, it's anthropology. . . . And so the point was not the supremacy of a Native perspective, but it's a piece that's been missing. . . . And that's what this museum is about. [And after seeing this exhibit] you *believed* the legitimacy of the Native voice.<sup>27</sup>

However, Dubin states that "the exhibit did not take into account the needs and expectations of the museum-going public, which still sought an authoritative experience."<sup>28</sup> It is in the interaction between the public and the museum where the "new museology" is most likely to break down. This is where the work of the museum, in response to the reflexive turn, can fail.<sup>29</sup>

The NMAI, as a "new museum," is going to display what I would suggest are subject-to-subject relations, particularly in the Our Lives gallery.<sup>30</sup> This gallery is much in line with the NMAI Exhibition Master Plan that was developed in 1995: "the museum intends for the exhibitions, for the most part, to be idea-driven: that is, that the exhibits will tell a story or communicate an idea, and the collections will be used to illustrate the story or illuminate the idea. The danger in this approach is that by definition the objects are subordinate to the idea of the exhibit instead of being the idea of the exhibit. This relegates the museum's most unique resource to a supporting role and may disappoint those visitors whose main goal is to connect with the objects."<sup>31</sup> For example, the Native groups in the Our Lives gallery are talking about *themselves*—their identities—what it means to be Inuit in Igloodik, or Mohawk in Kahnawake. These are situated identities, reflected upon and conveyed through the Native-authored text of the exhibit. It is about peoples' relations to each other, about *reflexive subjects*. The object, then, has become "illustration," accompanying the stories that Native people are telling about themselves. Unlike All Roads Are Good, the selection of objects is now at the endpoint of the exhibit-development process rather than at the beginning.

Therefore, there is a switch from evidence (and evidentiary claims) in *things* to evidence in *testimony* (or what I have been referring to as eth-

nographic evidence).<sup>32</sup> It does not matter that the seal skin pants were created for the exhibit and never intended to be worn; the object is made authentic by its author, by the authority of the subject, by the "Nateness" of the person who created it.<sup>33</sup> It is the authenticity of subject rather than the object that is now emphasized.

### Embedded Representations

This authenticity of the subject is uniquely embedded in the NMAI within a concentric layering of signifiers that also indicate "Nateness," including the museum institution itself. Although museum curators are moving from modernist-authoritative to postmodernist-interrogative positions as they attempt to erode the museum's position of authority, museum authority is not so easily undermined.<sup>34</sup> By its very nature, it legitimizes what it contains. Because it is a National Museum of *the American Indian*, Native authority is inherent in the institution.

An example from William Fitzhugh at the National Museum of Natural History illustrates the assumed authority of museums by the very nature of their being institutions of public learning. Fitzhugh explains how the simplistic and stereotyped image of the Eskimo, "has been created largely through museum representation"<sup>35</sup> (figure 11).

Fitzhugh goes on to say this is because visitors accept what is in the museum as *text*, as *truth*—even when it is what he describes to be an obviously outdated and underfunded exhibit.<sup>36</sup> In 1997, at Fitzhugh's suggestion, a Native of Kodiak Island, Sven Haakanson, conducted a review of the Eskimo exhibit. Haakanson concluded that the exhibit "does a wonderful job of demonstrating the types of tools, clothing and ritual materials. What the displays and text don't do is teach who the 'Eskimo' peoples really are. The visitors are taking the wrong information home, and this continues the misunderstandings of who the northern peoples are."<sup>37</sup>

The Our Lives exhibit, in contrast, is being constructed to address exactly that: who Native people are. One way to illuminate how Native voice is constructed and embedded to achieve this outcome is to examine what Michael Lynch calls "localized praxis."<sup>38</sup> For instance, this concept "examine[s] how an activity comes to identify itself as observation."<sup>39</sup> In other words, how does the work of the curatorial staff and the Native community members come to be identified as, say, Native voice? I focus here

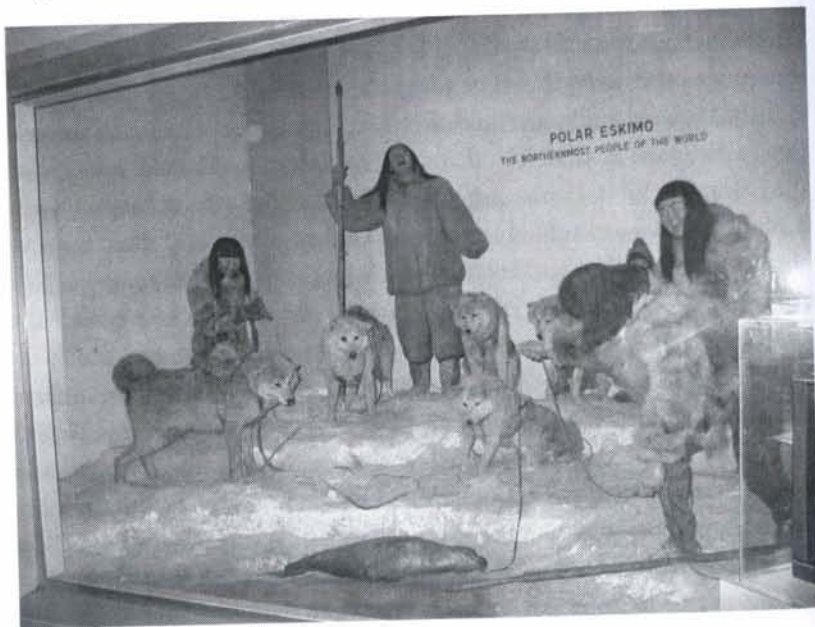


on how ethnographic evidence, in the form of (entextualized) narrative, comes to be seen as Native voice and authority in the Our Lives exhibit.

As a field researcher for the NMAI in 2001, I worked with the Inuit community in Igloolik, Nunavut. I spent several one-to-two week visits with the community, during which I spoke with Inuit of all ages, organized cocurator workshops and youth presentations, and conducted one-on-one interviews to facilitate community participation as we worked together to develop the content for their exhibit. I tape-recorded all of the meetings and interviews and then, upon returning to the NMAI's Cultural Resources Center just outside of Washington DC, I transcribed the recordings.

Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban explain that the transcription of oral discourse can be seen as the production of a "text-artifact with a certain concreteness and manipulability"; they add parenthetically that "Perhaps these text-artifactual properties are suggestive—and surely have been suggestive—of museum specimens that can be transported back from the field and evaluated for their *authenticity* and cultural-aesthetic

11. Closed but visible Polar Eskimo exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History, October 2004. Photo courtesy Jennifer Shannon.



authoritativeness.<sup>40</sup> This analogy rang especially true to me. In fact, it did not seem like an analogy at all but rather an actual museum practice, for the recordings and transcriptions I made are now considered to be part of the NMAI's collection. Therefore, curators and fieldworkers collect *discourse* as well as objects.<sup>41</sup> But this discourse is no longer considered only an informational resource or reference for the curator to use in creating text panels or describing objects—it is the text panel. Portions of the transcript are used, deliberately verbatim, to represent the Native voice in the exhibit.

Once approved by a community's cocurator committee, the Our Lives curator and researchers assemble the text-artifacts and images of associated objects by theme into digital documents, complete with the dimensions of objects and numbers of words per label, and send it to the exhibit designers. It is important to remember that, while my account here is centered on text, the exhibit is a three-dimensional rendering that incorporates all five senses in its final form.<sup>42</sup> The role of technology and its possibilities in exhibits are significant, particularly in producing such effects as multivocality and multiple frames of reference. Therefore, the designers re-embed, or animate, the text-artifacts in a new context that can include not just text but also video, audio, projected winds and temperatures, smells, and lighting changes. The designers manipulate the objects and text-artifacts in space, their proximities and juxtaposition contributing in new ways to the production of authentic representation through the replication of forms.

Native voice is also embedded within a particular style of exhibit design within the gallery that facilitates an *implicit* relatedness among exhibits through the replication of form. In her discussion of the Women's Information Network newsletter in *The Network Inside Out*, Annelise Riles explains how a combination of textual information and graphics produced the effect of having "what looked like heterogeneity at one glance" and then "could be viewed as replication at the next."<sup>43</sup> This "aesthetic of controlled heterogeneity" can be seen in the distinctive forms taken by the Chicago, Igloolik, and Kahnawake community exhibits, for example.<sup>44</sup> These exhibits were distinct but at the same time were being grouped under a particular thematic structure of Our Lives and contained compo-



sitional similarities present in all eight community exhibits, such as text panels, video screens, and photographs.<sup>45</sup>

While it is important to consider the inevitable cross-cultural comparisons that will occur among these eight community exhibits that are juxtaposed within the gallery, it is equally essential to consider another comparison that also inheres in this gallery's form: the relationship between a Native community and its simulacrum, or "reality checking," so to speak.<sup>46</sup> The comparison becomes not between likenesses but between something "real," out there, and its representation—between the community in Igloolik and the exhibit of Igloolik on the gallery floor. The apparent match in this comparison is achieved at the NMAI through the representational strategies described above. The feeling that there is an adequate match may be considered as an authentic visitor experience.

A more *explicit* comparison—and on a much grander scale—exists at the level of the NMAI's curvilinear architecture in relation to other National Mall museums (figure 12). There is a luxury in starting from the ground up, in not having to create a "new museum" in an old space, where

12. Entrance of the NMAI. Photo courtesy Jennifer Shannon.



exhibits can become "rooted in the architecture" of the museum.<sup>47</sup> For, as Kurin describes, "In the museum, categories of knowledge are carved into the walls, chiseled in stone, and constructed with brick and mortar."<sup>48</sup> The architectural nature of the museum, and of the exhibit, usually creates certain limitations; but here, it provides new possibilities for representational strategies. According to the NMAI Web site, as a product of collaborative engagement with Native communities, the "museum's architecture and landscape design represent a distinctly Native approach."<sup>49</sup> It is clear that the NMAI has been deliberate about its form and presence on the mall, which is dominated by buildings with classical architecture. This contradiction is most notable in its juxtaposition to its next door neighbor, the National Air and Space Museum, with its white walls and box-like structure.

### Preliminary Conclusions

As a new museum committed to a "new museology," the NMAI has been deliberate about distinguishing itself as a Native place through new engagements with and productions of authority, authenticity, representation, and Native voice in its inaugural exhibitions. It has shifted to a primacy of evidence of authenticity in ethnographic or discursive text rather than in objects or things. Representing subject-to-subject relations in the exhibit through embedded ethnographic text is, I suggest, intended to produce the effect of authority and authenticity of Native voice, or the authentic subject. The content of the exhibit, because it is a product and faithful entextualization of the authoritative subject, becomes authentic representation. Furthermore, the exhibits are enclosed by a structure that is described as a Native place. Because these moves are created in consultation with Native peoples, and through "transparent" methods, they are considered to be "authentic." The making of authentic representation, then, is a combination of form, content, and process that is perceived to be uniquely "Native." The NMAI therefore constructs Native voice through both implicit and explicit strategies of representation, replication, and comparison.

If we consider the text-artifact as ethnographic evidence embedded within the NMAI, according to Silverstein and Urban, "Politics can be seen, from this perspective, as the struggle to entextualize authoritatively,



and hence, in one relevant move, to fix certain metadiscursive perspectives on texts and discourse practices.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, the NMAI provides Native peoples with the means to take control of their own representations through their participation in the textualization of their voices, in the claim of authentic representation, and in the exhibiting of their cultures.

In the NMAI, as I have discussed in relation to the Our Lives gallery, the demands of the critiques of representation, the museum, the visiting public, and Native peoples appear to come together in a unique space and to mutually reinforce each other. There is no doubt that what I have found as evidence to produce these effects is a function of my attention to such devices as rhetoric and text, but that is what has been available to date. Only time would tell, as the museum opened in 2004, if the realization of these potentials was possible.

### Reflection

It has been a few years since the opening of the NMAI.<sup>51</sup> I was present at the grand opening, the procession of over 20,000 Native people walking the National Mall, on September 21, 2004. I was present at the first viewing of the exhibits by the Our Lives community cocurators as well as for the first reception by NMAI staff of the reviews in the newspapers. In many ways, as is common once ethnographic fieldwork is underway—and in a way doubling the process at the NMAI—my account now becomes peopled, as did the exhibits, with the voices and perspectives of those involved in the production of Native voice.

### The Definition of Native Voice

*Native Voice* is a phrase that continues to appear throughout NMAI written materials, including past mission statements and current exhibit labels. In the 2006 temporary exhibition about the Pacific Northwest Coast entitled *Listening to Our Ancestors*, NMAI staff attempted to be more transparent about the community-curating process through a series of panels at the end of the exhibit. One is labeled “Native Voice,” and it begins with a quote by NMAI director Rick West: “Native peoples possess important and authoritative knowledge about themselves and their cultures, past and present, and deserve to be at the museological table of in-

terpretation and representation.” The panel continues, “The photos and text shown here provide a glimpse of our exhibition process and reveal how and why the museum shares authority with indigenous people to represent Native culture and history. . . . Exhibitions at the National Museum of the American Indian are developed in partnership with Native people. This practice is based on the belief that indigenous people are best able to teach others about themselves. Their understanding of who they are and how they present themselves to the world is what the museum calls ‘Native voice.’”

This exhibit panel seemed to answer the question I posed to many NMAI staff members at the time of the museum opening: what is Native voice? As we discussed in 2004, it was never defined, nor was community curating ever described to prepare the visitors, or critics, for what they were seeing in the exhibitions.

Through the process of community curating, Native voice was produced by committee and resulted in a unified, authoritative voice in each exhibit, where community curators authored as a group each of the main thematic sections of their exhibits. This discussion and consensus process was not necessarily the original intention of the NMAI staff, who in a December 2000 vetting session of the Our Lives project had anticipated an atmosphere of “multivocality.” There were individual quotes in the exhibits, but they are mainly illustrations, not rebuttals or varied experiences, of the main text panels.

When I first began my interviews with staff in 2004, around the time of the opening, there was no consensus about what Native voice is: does it mean Native perspective (and how do you go about accessing that) or does it literally mean the voices of Native peoples (as it was interpreted to be in the inaugural exhibitions, where the text on the walls represented excerpts from recorded interviews and discussion among community curators). I asked NMAI director Rick West for his thoughts on these definitions. He explained that curators have been “very disciplined about it.” But with “some of the critique that’s come back about the exhibitions,” the “temptation” may be to “make it more, if you will, in terms of exhibition presentation, *perspective* rather than voice. I just want to make sure that we understand, just as we did on the *curatorial side* to begin with, what kinds of filters are being imposed and . . . what is the *cost* of that . . . [be-



cause] the farther you get from the words that were actually used, assuming that you were relying upon people who have capacity for expressing themselves to begin with, the *more* at risk you are of altering meanings, and changing meanings from the intention of the speaker.”<sup>52</sup>

### Institutional Dynamics of Native Voice

As West’s comments intimate, there was an institutional divide at the NMAI: a curatorial side and an exhibitions side; each had different ideas about the community-curating process and the criteria for evaluating the success of exhibits. It seems the conflict between the Exhibits and Curatorial departments—and anyone working there readily acknowledges this struggle has been going on for many years, as it often does in other museums—is that, in this particular case, they look to different constituencies. The NMAI mission statement lists two: “Native communities and the non-Native public.”<sup>53</sup>

As one NMAI staff member told me one afternoon,

I got the sense that Curatorial’s main constituency were the Native communities, and they really at some level *apparently*—I’m not saying this as *fact*—it *seemed* to me that sometimes that that was the only constituency that they were particularly interested in. . . . And that the museum content that they were acquiring was important content, and that they had to sort of defend the interests of Native people. In some ways, I tended to look at some people in Curatorial as like the Indian agents—there seemed to me to be a kind of almost sort of paternalism, you know, Indian people can’t take care of themselves so we have to take care of them. I think the tension on the other side was that, you know, we’re here to create exhibits and tell people about Native people and the constituency for Exhibits was the public. And I think that dichotomy was very pronounced—again, this is very subjective, you need to talk to other people about this.<sup>54</sup>

Generally, I think this is a fair assessment from someone working in a public-oriented department.<sup>55</sup> The curatorial staff worried about doing things “the right way” and squarely faced and served Native communities in its philosophy and practice to accomplish this, while the Exhibits and

Education departments were more consistently mindful and directed toward doing appropriate “translation” for the museum-going public.

Under the direction of Craig Howe in the Curatorial Department in 1999, the curatorial staff was taught and internalized that success meant Native community members would walk into their exhibit (and staff did think of it as the community’s exhibit) and say, “this feels right.” And truly, if that is the measure of success, then the Our Lives exhibits were greatly successful. Community members with whom I have spoken do feel ownership over their exhibits, and they do recognize their ideas and words on the walls. All of the community members with whom I have spoken have expressed great pride and a sense of familiarity when they encountered their space in the exhibition.

But there has been much criticism of the process within the NMAI. One program manager in a public-oriented department stated that community curating “has value, but we went way too far in one direction . . . [and] abdicated our responsibilities” to the information that visitors want and the intellectual framing they need.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, like many public-oriented department members, the script writer-editor saw his job as bringing “clarity” to the exhibit process, making it easier for the visitors to understand the exhibits. He and I talked about how sometimes the cocurators would choose not to provide content for exhibits in which the museum staff was interested: “I felt we often acted as supplicants at times when we should have provided direction [to communities in curating]. And I don’t think that was helpful. . . . I think that’s probably heresy in Curatorial.”<sup>57</sup> He discusses “paying the price” for just doing what the community wants and adds that it is the exhibition team to which you should have allegiance, not your department.

This common conception from outside the Curatorial Department—that there is a “cabal” as one museum consultant put it in 2006 during a discussion as to why the Curatorial Department needed to be “broken up”—is ironic since the curators did not have a single meeting as a department during the entire course of my fieldwork. Here, I think the public-oriented department members misinterpreted what was going on: there was not an allegiance among curatorial staff to their department, or perhaps even to each other, but rather—and fiercely—to the Native communities and individuals with whom they worked.



One curator explained to me that the curators' knowledge is key to determining what is important and relevant in the "raw transcripts," which "included a lot of sensitive information and a lot of irrelevant information." Knowing the difference was a curator's significant contribution, whereas others who were not in direct contact with communities "had no idea how the text and the things that were in the transcripts actually related to the *rest* of the exhibition as it had been developed so far."<sup>58</sup> To this curator, a request to turn over script-writing duties, "ran the risk of sort of just opening up the transcripts" and potentially displaying parts of conversations that community curators did not want in a public exhibit:

Curatorial stands in a unique face-to-face position with the community, and being in the *best* position to actually, in some cases, *interpret* the feeling of the community when there's no possibility of going back and asking every single question. That *somebody's* got to take *responsibility* for that. And it seemed at that point that *at that time*, members of Curatorial, specifically the lead curators, were the only ones who recognized that it was a *responsibility*. And it was what we *owed* communities. . . . That you couldn't understand communities and what they wanted for their exhibits solely by what was recorded on paper, what was in the transcripts. . . . Part of it had to do with the development of personal relationships and *feelings* of community, of having *heard* them, of having heard their often emotional reactions to what they're talking about.<sup>59</sup>

This curator's comments are representative of the Curatorial Department's ethos in general, which includes a desire to follow community wishes, at times against other interests and actors within the museum bureaucracy, and a desire to shepherd the exhibit content that was developed through an intimate partnership with Native community members during the exhibit development process. In this process, content could be transformed by multiple other experts through script editing, the juxtaposition of images or objects, and use of colors and textual strategies of emphasis or de-emphasis.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, according to the NMAI curators and research assistants, they took on the role of community "advocates."<sup>61</sup> This responsi-

bility to advocate is, in part, based on this particular kind of intimacy (or shared knowledge) curators have with cocurators. However, one curator revealed to me that in the museum bureaucracy, the Native communities often become pawns in interoffice power struggles, and that one way to assert themselves was to say, "the community wants it that way."<sup>62</sup> It was explained a number of times that a commitment to Native voice could also generate antagonism with other staff.

Therefore, participating in these community-curated exhibits had profound effects for NMAI staff within the museum; for instance, curators gained both trust in Native communities and reputations for being "obstructionist" or "protective" within the museum. Perhaps somewhat in consequence (along with other issues such as budget, timelines, and new business philosophies), about a year after the NMAI's opening the Curatorial Department was disbanded, and curators were reassigned to other departments during a massive organizational restructuring. There has also been widespread critical discussion in the museum about the merits and process of community curating.

### The Reception of Native Voice

The individual community cocurators with whom I spoke felt empowered by the collaborative process and appreciated the work of the NMAI curators and staff to elicit and organize their discussions and to respect their wishes in the course of exhibit development. One community cocurator explained that the work of NMAI Curatorial staff was, during meetings with their committee, to guide "the discussion but in a very subtle way. They were more or less listening to the feedback and comments from the cocurators themselves."<sup>63</sup> A Kalinago cocurator described the collaborative process as similar to "creating a dance—you have people dancing and then you catch your steps and say, Guys! I love this one! Why don't we stick on this one. So, it was fun, to listen to the community people . . . but at the same time *capture* the main fundamental things you were looking [for] in the exhibit."<sup>64</sup>

As for the impacts on the Native communities as a whole, in places that are more remote and not in the United States, like Igloodik in the Arctic and the Carib Territory in the Caribbean, there was very little overall impact for having been a part of this exhibition. For Igloodik, they had



worked with museums before and were frankly quite blasé about it (until they saw the final product, when they were beaming at seeing family members and friends in the videos on display). For the Kalinago in the Carib Territory, there was a sense of pride in being selected, but it was only realized in the few people who participated directly in the exhibit and had traveled to Washington DC for the opening.

On the other hand, for the St. Laurent Metis of Manitoba, it sparked a cultural center project, as they had won awards for their exhibit and were recognized in Canada for their contributions to the NMAI. Likewise, the Chicago urban Indian community recorded their experience attending the opening in an award-winning video entitled "From Wilson Ave to Washington DC," which is now being sold in their gift shop and in the NMAI. Furthermore, although over half of all American Indians live in cities, they are often overlooked and rarely if ever represented in museums. Their participation in the Our Lives exhibition gave members of the Chicago community a sense of validation, and they mention this participation in everything from grant applications to public gatherings.

Despite the communities' overwhelmingly positive reception, newspaper reviewers had an unexpectedly critical response to the exhibitions. Their descriptions of confusing exhibits or a lack of scholarship at the NMAI were often met with a common statement by NMAI staff: "They don't get it." As Ann McMullen and Bruce Bernstein explain in a memorandum to the board of trustees after the opening,

What is clear from the reviews is that NMAI's dependence on Native voices—without "conceptual rigor" and without integration with other sources, versions, or voices—makes the exhibits and their content distinctly unpersuasive. The direct question posed is "Why should visitors believe what the museum says, including what Native people say?" This suggests that NMAI has failed to make a case for Native voice as an authentic source by not providing visitors a foundation in the essential subjectivity of all sources—Native or non-Native—and failed to explain its own epistemology in bringing forward Native voices and depending on them for the authority of the exhibits.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps that is what *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast* exhibition attempted to correct through

their panels describing Native voice as I mentioned earlier. While this co-curating process has been commended by both Native and non-Native scholars, the content of the exhibits, and especially the lost opportunity of emphasizing the colonial encounter and genocide, left a number of reviewers dissatisfied.<sup>66</sup>

As often happens at this institution, as staff turnover occurs, approaches to exhibit making and deciding what is best for Indian Country takes on new forms. It remains to be seen what is next for community curating at the NMAI or if other methods will be developed for constructing Native voice. But I can at least say that, according to cocurators who participated in the Our Lives gallery, the museum's commitment to Native voice through community curating was an empowering experience, if somewhat sheltered from the battles within the institution.

## Conclusion

Many people, like myself, have perhaps entered a museum and reviewed its exhibits assuming that the display is as it was always meant to be. But over the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that each exhibition—through its multiple authors and multiple specialists as well as through its architectural, budgetary, and design requirements—represented instead a compromise of competing commitments, interests, and visions. While I had anticipated a uniquely successful intersection of postmodern engagement and authoritative representation, I found in the course of my fieldwork that the authority of the Native communities in these collaborative exhibits, while not contested, did not satisfy many reviewers both within and outside of the museum. It did, however, create ethical relationships for Our Lives contributors and accurate representations according to those who were closely partnered in the co-curating committee meetings.

By focusing on the practices of knowledge production, or the collaborative process of exhibition development, we can see how a "thing" like an exhibit acquired its "thingness," how text and imagery became Native voice, and consider whether these constructions satisfied the promises of authenticity and authority made by the museum. We can also see how discourses of paternalism versus advocacy and translation versus intimacy reveal different communities of expertise with different ways of know-



ing, understanding, and engaging with the reflexive subjects of museum exhibitions.

Finally, this form of inquiry leads us to better understand the role of the curators and their commitment to communities in this collaborative process. We see that Native voice is constructed not only through embedded material representations but also through the social relations of its producers, including the source communities and museum staff.<sup>67</sup> Native voice is not just the authored text in the exhibit; it is also the anxiety and commitment and advocacy that NMAI staff and Native cocurators bring to the process—each interacting with one another and being responsible for each other within their own communities.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. Smithsonian Institution Office of Public Affairs, "National Museum of the American Indian Announces Grand Opening on Sept. 21," news release, January 15, 2004.
2. Richard West, "A New Idea of Ourselves: The Changing Presentation of the American Indian," in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, ed. National Museum of the American Indian (Washington DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2000), 7, emphasis mine.
3. Ruth B. Phillips, "Community Collaboration in Exhibitions," introduction to *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura L. Peers and Alison K. Brown (London: Routledge, 2003), 166.
4. My research has been dedicated to documenting the collaborative relationships and exhibit-making process of the NMAI Our Lives gallery and is based on fieldwork from June 2004 to June 2006, which was made possible by a dissertation-fieldwork grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I conducted nine months of fieldwork at the museum from June to December of 2004 and from March to June of 2006. I also spent six months in each of two Native communities featured in the Our Lives exhibition: the urban Indian community of Chicago and the Kallinago (or Carib) community of the Commonwealth of Dominica. This research is rooted in my own experiences of working in the NMAI's Curatorial Department from August 1999 to May 2002 and as a contract fieldworker in 2003 and therefore provides a particular form of situated knowledge about museum practice and perspective. For a discussion about situated knowledge, see Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 183–201. I would like to thank Hiro Miyazaki, Pa-

mela Smart, and Kim Couvson for their comments on earlier drafts. I would like also to thank the NMAI staff represented or quoted herein for their contributions through thoughtful conversations with me over the years, especially Dr. Cynthia Chavez, who was the lead curator of the Our Lives gallery and who encouraged me to embark on this work.

5. The 2003 version of this paper began as an experimental essay in 2002, which I later condensed and presented at the Cornell Department of Science and Technology Studies Conference, "Observing, Investigating, Reporting: Science Studies and Local Ethnographies," in April of 2003. It presents a perspective on museum practice that I certainly would not have imagined while working as a museum researcher. Using the notion of evidence to think differently about museum practice was inspired by a course taught by Hiro Miyazaki.
6. Margaret Dubin, *Native America Collected: The Culture of an Art World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 90.
7. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 85.
8. West, "A New Idea of Ourselves."
9. Michael M. Ames, *Museums, the Public, and Anthropology: A Study in the Anthropology of Anthropology* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986).
10. Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992). In anthropology, calls to reconfigure ethnography and anthropology and to renegotiate fieldwork are indicators of this crisis. See Douglas Holmes and George Marcus, "Cultures of Expertise and the Management of Globalization: Toward a Re-functioning of Ethnography," in *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); George Marcus, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), esp. p. 89. Marcus and Fischer explain in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* that this time of "crisis" is similar to that in the 1920s and 1930s and that it is apart of a cycle of paradigms; Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 8, 12. Dominic Boyer addresses the notion of crisis rhetoric in intellectual disciplines in his discussion of German intellectuals with a deep sense of cultural pessimism, who perceive a decline in intellectual and cultural traditions. This "language of crisis" intimates a loss of prestige and authority, while the status and security of the German intellectuals were quite high. Dominic Boyer, "The Social Life of German Cultural Bourgeoisie in the 'Long Nineteenth Century' and Their Dialectical Knowledge of German-Ness" in *Spirit and System: Media,*



- Intellectuals, and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Similarly, consider the subsequent "museum boom" since this time in relation to Ames's and Sturtevant's "language of crisis." Compare Mary Bouquet, ed., *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); with Ames, *Museums, the Public, and Anthropology*; Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*; and William C. Sturtevant, "Does Anthropology Need Museums?" *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* 182 (1969): 619–50.
11. Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 8; and Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 168. With influence from the field of literary criticism, James Clifford and George Marcus's influential text *Writing Culture* took a critical approach to the main product of anthropological research—the ethnography; see James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Reflecting on their earlier work in *Writing Culture*, Marcus and Fischer conclude that this crisis arose with an "uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality." Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 8. By regarding ethnography as invention rather than as the (direct) representation of cultures and by emphasizing it as a writing process, authors in *Writing Culture* brought into question the act of representation and the authority and authenticity of the writer and the written document, respectively. I would argue that Vine Deloria Jr., a board member of the NMAI and a notorious critic of anthropological engagements with Native peoples, was equally critical to the changing nature of the museum and of anthropology in North America. Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* contributed significantly to the critique of anthropological literature, ethnographic practice, and contemporary museums. Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); see also Thomas Biolsi and Larry J. Zimmerman, *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria, Jr., and the Critique of Anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).
  12. See for example, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); and Richard Kurin, *Reflections of a Cultural Broker: A View from the Smithsonian* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).
  13. I am sure that some NMAI staff members would bristle at my reference to the NMAI as an ethnographic museum; I use the term here because the process through which exhibit material was obtained was in part through (para)ethnographic practices. For those staff members with whom I spoke, when they called an exhibit "too ethnographic," they considered this clearly to be a negative critique.
  14. Kurin, *Reflections of a Cultural Broker*, 283. Discussions of authenticity regarding museums tend to focus on the authenticity of objects, or the valuation of art and artifacts or of art versus artifacts; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Clifford, *Routes*, 211; Christopher Steiner and Ruth B. Phillips, *African Art in Transit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 100–2; Michael O'Hanlon, *Paradise: Portraying the New Guinea Highlands* (London: British Museum Press, 1993), 62, 81; Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Steiner, "Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 19; Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Ames discusses how the Canadian Museum of Civilization has been shifting the focus away from authentic objects or "real things," to authentic visitor "experience." In other words, whether it is the "real thing," a replica, or a digital or graphic representation, it is the visitor's experience within the exhibit that is desired to be authentic. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 158–59.
  15. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 87.
  16. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 86.
  17. *Native* is not only an adjective, but it is also a noun used by the NMAI to describe Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Nations peoples. This is the language of the museum that I have chosen to follow in this essay.
  18. NMAI, "The National Museum of the American Indian," Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/index.html> (accessed December 12, 2002).
  19. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 85.
  20. These meetings were held at the American Indian Center, which is a central place to access the community. But of course this also excluded many American Indians who do not participate in activities at the center. However, the issue of the limitations that this approach had for a broader representation of Chicago Native experience is beyond the scope of this particular paper. See James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945–75* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
  21. William W. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins: Exhibiting Eskimos at the Smithsonian," in *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 214.
  22. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 92. The Museum of the American Indian begun



by George Gustav Heye was later acquired by the Smithsonian, and it then became the NMAI.

23. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins," 227.
24. See by way of comparison Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 204.
25. NMAI, "All Roads Are Good," (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).
26. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 89, 96.
27. Jim Volkert (former head of the NMAI Exhibits Department), personal interview with the author, Washington DC, July 8, 2004.
28. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 92, emphasis mine.
29. For a discussion of what happens when a discipline's knowledge fails, see Hirokazu Miyazaki and Annelise Riles, "Failure as an Endpoint," in Ong and Collier, *Global Assemblages*, 320–32. See also numerous accounts of the exhibit *Into the Heart of Africa*, which was described as a failure to communicate with the audience, who misunderstood the "sophisticated" exhibit and became angry: Anna Laura Jones, "Exploding Cannons: The Anthropology of Museums," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993): 211; Jeanne Cannizzo, *Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1989); Jeanne Cannizzo, "Exhibiting Cultures: Into the Heart of Africa," *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1 (1991): 150–60; and Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 157.
30. This lack of recognizable museum objects was emphasized by the Collections staff, referring to the Our Lives gallery as "Our Props" (as opposed to "Our Loans" for the Our Peoples gallery and "Our Objects" for the Our Universes gallery). In 2004 I overheard one senior manager call the Our Lives gallery "T-Shirts and Baseball Caps."
31. Gerard Hilferty and Associates, *National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution Mall Facility Exhibition Master Plan, Phase I Interim Report: Orientation and Research* (Washington DC, 1995), 3.
32. See Lorraine Daston, "Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe," in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James K. Chandler, Arnold Ira Davidson, and Harry D. Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 274.
33. Ames asks in his discussion of the valuation and authenticity of Native art, is a work Indigenous because of its aesthetics or "is being Native enough, sharing in the indigenous experience?" Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 82–83.
34. Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 84. See also Fred R. Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 198–99; Ruth B. Phillips, "Apec at the Museum of Anthropology: The Politics of Site and the Poetics of Sight Bite," *Ethnos* 65, no. 2 (2000): 172; Brian Durrans, "The Future of the Other: Changing Cultures on Display in Ethnographic Museums," in *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Cultures on Display*, ed. Robert Lumley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 164; Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 22.
35. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins," 209. Fitzhugh and I are referring to the outdated "Eskimo" exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC. While this exhibit was still up, the Alaska Office of the National Museum of Natural History's Arctic Studies Program began creating more recent and collaboration-centered exhibitions.
36. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins," 228. See also Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 25; David Dean, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 116.
37. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins," 229.
38. Michael Lynch, *Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action: Ethnomethodology and Social Studies of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 281.
39. Lynch, *Scientific Practice and Ordinary Action*, 280.
40. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.
41. As anthropologist Pam Smart reminded me, there are other centers that specifically collect "discourse," such as the Smithsonian's Folklife Center.
42. See Mary Bouquet, "Thinking and Doing Otherwise: Anthropological Theory in Exhibitionary Practice," *Ethnos* 65, no. 2 (2000): 226.
43. Annelise Riles, *The Network Inside Out* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 119.
44. Riles, *Network Inside Out*, 120.
45. For example, the fact that a multiracial, urban-Indian population will be displayed in the same manner as federally and state-recognized tribes, presented as a cohesive community, can be seen as intending to create a sense of legitimization or validation in viewers' perspectives of an often-overlooked but majority Native population.
46. This realism in exhibition design is similar to what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as an "in situ" approach, in which the installation tries to "include more of what was left behind, even if only in replica." Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography," in Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*, 388.
47. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins," 233.
48. Kurin, *Reflections of a Cultural Broker*, 279.
49. "The design of NMAI's facilities, including that for the new museum on the National Mall, reflects the museum's commitment to work in consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Native people in all of the museum's activities. Between 1990 and 1993, NMAI and other Smithsonian offices conducted a series of twenty-four consultations with various constituency groups to determine what they wanted the new museum to be. The majority of the participants in these con-



- sultations were Native people. . . . While consultations were oriented toward architectural and program issues, discussions often took the form of animated, emotional, and philosophical conversations about the condition and representation of Native people—past, present, and future.” NMAI, “The National Museum of the American Indian,” <http://www.nmai.si.edu/mall/index.html> (accessed December 12, 2002).
50. Silverstein and Urban, *Natural Histories of Discourse*, 11.
  51. This portion of the essay is based on a conference paper prepared for the Central States Anthropological Association Meeting in Omaha, Nebraska, in April 2006.
  52. Richard West (NMAI director), personal interview with the author, Washington DC, November 18, 2004.
  53. NMAI, *Mission Statement*, (Smithsonian Institution, 2002).
  54. Personal interview with an NMAI staff member, Washington DC, September 8, 2004.
  55. I am in no way suggesting that public-oriented department staff do not also have a strong desire to do what is right for Native communities; but this divide in language, interpretation, perception, and practice about how to fulfill the NMAI’s mission of Native voice among NMAI departments is a key part of the museum’s internal dynamics.
  56. Personal interview with an NMAI program manager, Washington DC, March 23, 2006.
  57. Personal interview with an NMAI script writer–editor, Washington DC, September 8, 2004.
  58. Personal interview with an NMAI curator, Suitland, Maryland, November 23, 2004.
  59. NMAI curator, personal interview, November 23, 2004.
  60. In general, Curatorial’s direct and intimate contact with Native communities was coveted by other departmental staff members, who did not have such intimate experiences but who would say to me they wished they could. In this way, in a symbolic capital sense, Curatorial is at the top of the hierarchy, and its members are considered to be in a respected field. But in a power sense, as in decision-making capacity within the museum structure, they were far lower on the chain of command over time.
  61. “All three [inaugural] exhibits are community curated, at least 70 percent. What we mean by that is the museum curators, the museum staff, whether Native or non-Native, serve as facilitators or advocates, that the *experts reside in the communities*.” Bruce Bernstein (deputy assistant director of cultural resources), at the Our Lives vetting session, December 14, 2000.
  62. Personal interview with an NMAI curator, Suitland, Maryland, October 29, 2004.
  63. Personal interview with an NMAI cocurator, Carib Territory, Dominica, April 13, 2005.
  64. Personal interview with an NMAI cocurator, Carib Territory, Dominica, April 25, 2005.
  65. Ann McMullen and Bruce Bernstein, *Mall Museum Reviews: An Overview and Analysis* Unpublished Internal Document Created for the Board of Trustees, (National Museum of the American Indian, 2004). Used with permission of the authors.
  66. Amy Lonetree and Sonya Atalay, eds., “Critical Engagements with the National Museum of the American Indian,” special issue, *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3–4 (2006).
  67. Laura L. Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).
  68. P. Batty discusses the relationship between government advisors and Aboriginal communities in Australia as well as the need for Aboriginal authorization to conduct projects in their communities. He examines how Aboriginal people must endorse these advisors, investing them with cultural capital. Through a one-on-one relationship with a particular Aboriginal person (like a community liaison in the NMAI community curating process), the white individual’s motivations, personal commitment, and alignment with the broader group could be explained and endorsed by his or her Aboriginal partner. In other words, confirmation that a hitherto “unknown white fella” was “on side” was facilitated through his or her demonstrable relationship with an Aboriginal person with the group. One could say that through these arrangements, the Aboriginal partner “empowered” his non-Aboriginal offside to work on behalf of the Aboriginal community. P. Batty, “Private Politics, Public Strategies: White Advisers and Their Aboriginal Subjects,” *Oceania* 75, no. 3 (2005): 217.

While NMAI curators were both Native and non-Native, their relationship to Native communities as outside government advisors (in museum matters) can also be seen as being in need of endorsement by the community. Particularly in the process of interviewing and in other work outside of the community curator meetings, the liaison and Native cocurators were essential to NMAI staff being introduced to and having positive working relationships with additional community members.