

COMMENTARY

“WHITE PEOPLE WILL BELIEVE ANYTHING!” Worrying about Authenticity, Museum Audiences, and Working in Native American-Focused Museums¹

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ABSTRACT

The core argument of this opinion is that in museums focused on Native Americans, staff members must abandon colonial and stereotypic views about Native Americans. They also must challenge notions commonly held by Indians and non-Indians that only Indians can provide authentic information about Indians. Museums can accomplish this by presenting cultural realities that are multithreaded, multivocal, and complicated. [Keywords: Native Americans, authenticity, multivocality]

Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), just told me that I’m not very bright and that everything I know about Indians² is wrong.³

Some days his assessment is spectacularly on target, although on most days, I just do what I do and won’t let what he says bother me all that much. On my “not very bright” days, I have to wonder. A couple of recent days really stand out.

A Native American colleague⁴ and I were sharing a presentation to elementary and secondary teachers at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, which is where part of my job as Public Scholar of Native American Representation resides. I discussed some general cultural issues relating to Indians and sovereignty with the teachers, then my colleague gave his own perspective on the issues. When the time for questions came, most of them were addressed to him. He’s a pretty good speaker, and the audience was hanging on his every word. Along the way I heard him give a preposterous answer to a question about his people’s practices. As we were leaving, I told him I didn’t believe a word of it and asked him why he would say such a thing. His refreshingly honest response was startling: “I have a rule

when talking to mostly non-Indian audiences. If I get asked a question and don’t know the answer, I make it up. White people will believe anything, and if they don’t believe me, they are too nice to say so.” Even though the audience members were well-meaning and intensely interested in Indians—they wouldn’t have been there otherwise—that they apparently believed my colleague was proof enough of what Smith says.

The next “not-very-bright day” was downright gloomy. I served as faculty advisor for a non-Indian, Museum Studies undergraduate who happened to land an internship at the NMAI. When she got the internship, both she and I were enthused at the opportunity. The clouds started building for both of us soon after her internship began. She e-mailed me⁵:

I’ve faced the experience of being considered “lesser” and even treated differently for being non-native. It’s been like being slapped in the face. I also have found out that native students are getting paid more than non-natives, which is frustrating mainly for the reason they didn’t tell anyone (I’m all about being up front and honest). These are things I often read and discuss with you, but man, having it happen to me has been really annoying. I’m not one of those overly sympathetic non-natives or pessimistic jerky historians. I try to respect people as human beings regardless, and if I can help get some voices heard in public history (black, native, woman, whatever), then right on.

But, I’m sure maybe you’ve had experience in this and can maybe give me some advice. I’ve heard everything from “whites shouldn’t be curating” (no surprise to hear that) to a non-native NMAI employee (who also has experienced what I have) tell me about complaints from native staff members that there are “too many non-native interns.” One of the students . . . tells me her ultimate goal is to destroy museums and to have all the objects back with “the people.” I wasn’t sure how to react. That militant concept was quite beyond the usual “repatriation” attitude I’m familiar with.

We also met with [a key staff member] at the museum.⁶ He was pretty blatant about his lack of interest in the non-native contribution to the

museum, and it really made me feel like I have no right, or place, to be here.

She was upset, not so much about the treatment, but puzzled about the why of it. She knows, intellectually, the roots of Indian anger at museums, anthropology, and history, and, as she notes, she supports increasing native voice and control in museums. Dealing emotionally with the exclusion she felt is another matter.

I can't speak for my student. If she has been listening in my classes, however, she knows what I would say about the exclusion of non-native voices from museums. No matter how unfair keeping Indians from telling their own stories has been, having native voice be the *only* voice in Indian-focused museums would be unfortunate. Ultimately, misinformation would continue and would be put onto exhibit labels and into programming by Indians. Stereotypes now in place would be replaced with new ones, albeit Indian generated. Museums would remain as damaging to Indians as they ever were. I recall a statement from Susan Shown Harjo (1995) in an interview about repatriation and the at-that-time recently approved NMAI:

It is really the beginning of native peoples writing history right for the first time, and taking control of what is said about us, and how we are portrayed, and what we say. From now on what we've really earned is the right to screw up as badly as the white people have. (Laughs) [in transcript of interview] And we will do that, I have no doubt.

I would reply that if Indians believe they will be "writing history right for the first time," they will be as mistaken as any other group that thought it had the truth. No group has a monopoly on truth about itself, no matter how much they might like to think so. Such self-delusion tends to be a mix of hubris and ethnocentrism as much as anything, and wanting to exclude other groups from telling their story is a common initial reaction in the decolonizing process.

Telling an accurate story always requires multiple perspectives and voices, but getting to that point often is not easy because it means giving up at least some control of the storytelling process. Sometimes the problem can be with non-Indian museum audi-

ences, as it was in my "white people will believe anything" example. Non-Indians, here to include even African, Asian, Latino, and other Americans, especially those interested in Indians, often have at least a bit of "white guilt" about what happened to Indians that causes them to buy into an idea promoted by some Indians that everything that non-Indians have said about Indians must be wrong, that only Indians can represent native culture authentically, and that only Indians have the real story about Indian heritage and culture. If these non-Indians would only give it serious thought, they would realize how impossible it is for a single person to have the whole story about the culture of which they themselves are a member. If you work with Indians long enough, one of the most common phrases you'll hear is, "I only speak for myself, not for anyone else in my tribe." Add the stunning diversity of American Indian cultures to the mix, and trying to tell an encompassing, authentic story becomes utterly impossible. Indians adamantly point out that their cultures aren't all alike, so if you can't tell a complete story of even one nation, how can you begin to tell the stories of all of them? To even get close to the latter, it takes an entire museum such as the NMAI, but even with NMAI, the initial reactions were highly critical, even from Indian people.⁷ My Native American colleague took advantage of his audience by playing on their ignorance, their stereotypes, and their naïveté. He kept them "not very bright." Perhaps that's a form of just desserts for all that happened to Indians under colonization, but it isn't at all helpful. Museums, his audience, and Indians would be better served if he just said, "I don't know," instead of making something up.

I don't worry about my student who interned at the NMAI. She "has her head on straight" and has come back to do an internship at the Eiteljorg. As she thinks about her experiences on her way to becoming a museum professional, they will provide insights to complex issues and attitudes she'll face if she stays in the Indian museum business. The biggest lesson she will have learned is that she really doesn't know much. I do worry about her fellow NMAI interns, however, if they think that because they are Indians they have inside or better access to the truth than my student, and I'm equally concerned about their NMAI mentors if they also happen to believe it.⁸ If they do, they'll be disrespecting their audiences as

much as my colleague did. My assumption—more a hope—is that when they actually start to work on the nuts and bolts of an exhibition or program they’ll realize they don’t know much either, will say “I don’t know” when asked, and will find out from Indian *or* non-Indian people who might actually know.

The best Indian museums can be built; the best exhibitions can be assembled; the best programs can be organized; and the best staff members can be trained only if we abandon colonial views and associated stereotypes about Indians, dump notions of authenticity centered on the idea that you can’t really know about Indians unless you are one, and really embrace the principle that cultural realities are complicated, multithreaded, and multivocal. I know that Paul Chaat Smith really didn’t mean to insult me, nor did he really mean that I wasn’t very bright because I am interested in Indians. Rather, he meant to tell me and his “not very bright” readers—the only ones likely to buy and read his book—that Indians are pretty darned complicated. As he said in an interview about the book, “It isn’t about us talking and you listening: it’s about an engagement that moves our collective understanding forward.” What really matters is “whether we can build new understandings of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century” (Morris 2009). That’s a useful perspective, one that will serve museums and the public better than some of the attitudes many of us apparently hold.⁹

Notes

1. I hope you’ll actually read this note right after you read the title. I’ve never put a note on a title before, but I think it might be worth doing here. I realize this is in complete violation of the AAA style guide, but the copy editor and I couldn’t find a better place to put it. For this paper, the journal’s anonymous reviewers provided thoughtful and thought-provoking opinions. They were so good and well written that they could easily be publishable commentaries on my commentary. One reviewer noted that the essay seemed like an op-ed piece, which is exactly what I intended. After reading and pondering their comments, I’ve decided to leave the essay pretty much as I wrote and edited it. That doesn’t mean I’m right and they are wrong or that my prose and reason are

unassailable. Rather, the key points of the essay are relatively straightforward, and I see no need to over-analyze them as a couple of the reviewers seemed to suggest I should. To address some of their concerns, and maybe yours, this essay is not at all about reverse racism. I suppose it could be about racialism, but must we always go there? I certainly do know that there is a complex history relating to the very idea of “Indian” and the relationship of Indians to museums, both too long to tell in an op-ed piece. Simply put, I am concerned about the self-perceptions of Indians and non-Indians and their views of each other within Native American-focused museums that complicate—if not mystify—notions of authenticity and truth.

2. Please understand that I am more than aware that some readers may be ill-at-ease at my interchangeable usage of Indian, Native, Native American, and American Indian. All of them have political connotations, but I will mostly use Indian for convenience, as many Indians also do.

3. *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* is the title of Paul Chaat Smith’s (2009) new book of essays. On p. 70 he writes:

Generally speaking, white people who are interested in Indians are not very bright. Generally speaking, white people who take an active interest in Indians, who travel to visit Indians and study Indians, who seek to help Indians, are even more not very bright. I theorize that in the case of white North Americans, the less interest they have in Indians, the more likely it is that one (and here I mean me or another Indian person) could have an intelligent conversation with them.

4. Seriously, I’ve given talks with several Native American colleagues at the Eiteljorg. Don’t bother trying to figure out who might have said this. That really isn’t important. I suspect several of them could have said the same thing, but chose not to.

5. E-mail being what it is, I’ve editorially cleaned up some very minor bits of spelling and the like, but nothing to change the substance of the e-mail at all. She has had an opportunity to approve or disapprove my editing and usage. This e-mail is being used with her permission, and even though some will probably bother trying to figure out her identity, that is unimportant to the point of this commentary. Nor, really, is the “truth” behind any of her worries (about differential intern pay, for example). What might be important is her personality. She is very open, bright,

observant, friendly, nonjudgmental, and upbeat, maybe to a fault, which is why her e-mail was so disturbing.

6. By now you should know that I'm going to tell you not to bother trying to figure out this person's identity either. Wasting time doing so misses the point.

7. See papers by both native and non-native authors in *American Indian Quarterly* critiquing the NMAI, but especially those by Atalay (2006), Issac (2006), and Lonetree (2006).

8. In fairness to the NMAI and to the Eiteljorg, I am more than aware that such attitudes are common among staff members at many Indian-focused museums. Both museums are real treasures for what they accomplish. Singling them out is just an accident of writing this comment.

9. In no way is the essay meant to be judgmental. There are historical reasons why certain attitudes exist, attitudes that will be tough to get rid of. Please realize that I don't think there is any "holier than thou" attitude here either. When I teach my Indians of North America class, the first thing of substance I tell them is that even though I have studied, worked with, written about, and taught about Indians for more than 30 years, I don't know anything (I actually use a cruder word than that). What I do is about moving my understanding forward, to paraphrase Paul Chaat Smith.

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