ENCOUNTERING Histories AND Humanities AT THE Smithsonian MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

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INTRODUCTION: CONCERNING NEW MUSEOLOGY

“We, amnesiacs all, condemned to live in an eternally fleeting present, have created the most elaborate of human constructions, memory, to buffer ourselves against the intolerable knowledge of the irreversible passage of time and irretrievability of its moments and events”
Geoffrey Sonnabend

The epigraph above presents an elegiac theory of memory that disowns the unassailability of its affect and instinct and posits it instead as a canny but cunningly disguised human construction. Geoffrey Sonnabend, the architect of a cultural-scientific theory of memory called Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter, is the spectral guest of honor at the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT) in Los Angeles, where his life’s work is presented in the Delani/Sonnabend Halls. The only difference between this obscure theory and many others, in a small museum among countless museums, is that Sonnabend, Obliscence, and the narrative told in the MJT are not real. The MJT is not a museum of history—although it has been called a museum of an alternative but unclaimed history (Weschler 18)—but instead materializes what people go to museums for, and what they expect: to learn something that they personally are not familiar with, from a combination visual-technological display containing information presented realistically and with seeming authenticity; to be assured that what they are seeing is real and valuable, otherwise it would not be in a museum. It manipulates peoples’ knowledge of history, thereby also exposing and raising questions about what information museums provide, and in what ways. Therefore, Sonnabend’s theory could provocatively read: we have “created the most elaborate of human constructions, museums, to buffer ourselves…”
The museums I discuss in this paper are not as experimental or alienating as the Museum of Jurassic Technology; nevertheless, they present varying self-conscious revisions and responses to the criticisms of museum eliteness, inauthentic representations, material values, and non-inclusion. These form part of “new” museology, a movement triggered by concern that “old” museum studies were “too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums,” were not seen as “a theoretical or humanistic discipline,” and because their “questions [have] been all too rarely articulated, let alone discussed” (Vergo 3). As Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine explain, “what is at stake in struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity” (15). The primary concerns of museological studies are those of identity, inclusion, just representation, and agency since “exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not” (15).

I suggest that two permanent exhibits in Smithsonian museums from the last five years, Our Peoples in 2007\footnote{While the exhibit opened at the NMAI’s inauguration in 2004, Miranda Brady mentions a different version of a script used in the gallery (139), as does Paul Chaat Smith (140); therefore, I base this date on the latest version of the script by Smith and Rosen.} and the Hall of Human Origins in 2010, provide varying responses to the destabilization of historical, ethnographic, and representative authority, and to the problem of museums excluding or ignoring groups among their constituency. The first chapter considers the David A. Koch Hall of Human Origins opened in 2010 at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History as a reaction to calls for
increasing interdisciplinarity in display contents, and interactivity and inclusion in visitor relations. The exhibit itself forms part of an expensive wide-ranging research project based on archaeological research, technological treatment and reconstruction of objects, and interactive media displays. The second chapter discusses the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian (hereafter, NMAI), one of three permanent art-cultural exhibits alongside the “Our Universes” and “Our Lives” installations. Our Peoples consists of eight periodically changing “self-curated” individual exhibits from tribal groups across the Americas, and one “backbone” exhibit about the construction of history.

This paper discusses these exhibits in particular because of their differing uses of representational media, their orientation toward different visitor constituencies, their varying attention to history, and their interconnective relations to events beyond the museum walls, which demonstrate an awareness of and restitution for some museum criticisms. For example, the legislative milestone of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 was implicated in the foundation and mission of the NMAI (Cobb 485). Similarly, the Hall of Human Origins is part of the Human Origins Initiative that supports not just the experience in the Museum of Natural History, but also diverse field research projects in conjunction with the National Geographic Society, and a wide-reaching education network dedicating to bringing the work of the Human Origins Program directly to homes and classrooms (Smithsonian Institution).
Prior to the normalization, publicization, and institutionalization of major (national) museums in the mid-19th century, collectors’ objects, modes of display, and dedication to classification and authenticity varied wildly and arbitrarily. The eccentricity of early curiosity cabinets exemplifies “the replacement of the narrative of production by the narrative of the collection, the replacement of the narrative of history with the narrative of the individual subject—that is, the collector himself” (Stewart 156). No longer under the direction of an autocratic collector, or bound to obscurely specific categories of knowledge, museums are now interactive and evaluative. Susan Stewart asserts that while early collections were “dependent on, and a mirroring of, the larger economy of surplus value,” they did not permeate other aspects of political, market, and sociocultural life, maintaining a “smaller economy is self-sufficient and self-generating with regard to its own meanings and principles of exchange” (159). The same cannot hold for museums today, since their expansion and saturation in the public sphere has indelibly implicated them in larger nation-building, knowledge-making, ideology-perpetuating structures.

Since museums variously receive national funding, partner with schools, and support independent research projects, they are neither self-sufficient nor entirely controlled by associated governing and academic bodies. Museums ideally operate empirically and abstractly to defuse controversy and avoid polarizing visitors; however, this paper suggests they should instead strive to be worldly, circumstantial, and self-cognizant in their own production. Theorists have also claimed the necessity of
museums existing “beyond the turnstile”\textsuperscript{2}—beyond attendance rates and profits, and beyond the physical walls of the museum building—and adapting their collecting and display practices in order to fit with technocratic modes of expression and interpretation.\textsuperscript{3}

Museums contribute to interdisciplinary, pedagogical, and political discourses. They showcase material diversity, technological experiments, research innovation, and aesthetic and architectural design. Museums as materialized texts and techniques can mark phenomena such as the globalization and hybridization of cultures, the decreasing attention and funding for the arts, and the adapting technologies and progressive digitization which alter what we consider to be authentic experiences and real connections. Museums provide a mode for visitors to identify themselves based on temporal changes, progression, and memory, thus organizing their personal, political, and national lives according to historical constructions. They contribute to the relationship between subjects and time developed through encounters between artifacts of objective, material culture and subjective experiences. Finally, I also consider museums to present opportunities for interdisciplinary education and engagement between cultural studies, critical theory, identity politics, changing media, and activism.

\textsuperscript{2} Selma Holo and Mari-Tere Álvarez, \textit{Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values}, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2009). Print. The authors list the values necessary for the future (responsible and profitable) success of museums as follows: public trust, primacy of the collection, relevance, inclusion, globalization, creativity, new alliances, authentic experiences, generation of knowledge, and communication.

Museums constitute variously visual, textual, technological, and multi-sensory experiences, marking them both as new media instruments that may subsume cultural and educational experiences in the future, and as examples of steadfast, material opposition against the digitization of culture and communication. They increasingly demand a multivalent skill set to view and interpret displays; therefore, they build and enforce the necessary sensory and disciplinary connections in their visitors. Given the value, potential, and power of museums to bridge the divide between people and objects, between empowering information and dominant knowledge, and between education and entertainment, exhibits and their ideologies merit further study to ensure they avoid criticism and backlash regarding inauthentic representation, exclusion, and betrayal of their collections or communities.

Museum and cultural scholars address the valorization of objects as paradigms of ownership, production, and validation of cultural authority; interrogate the intermingling relationship of history and heritage displayed in museums; and criticize the conflation of history and memory as an arbitrary construction of the past. The questions of what, who, and how to include in exhibits also permeate discussions of pluralist versus separatist strategies in museum displays and constituency. James Clifford, for example, considers how people and their cultures (as opposed to science and art) are ethically and adequately represented by ethnographic authority, and discusses the changing trajectory of ethnography.

James Clifford’s “On Collecting Art and Culture” discusses how collections focusing on the materiality of their artifacts can perpetuate oppressive class privileges
of ownership and dominative perspectives of labor. Museum curators and designers often present collections and the objective world built within them as “given, not produced,” thus allowing for “historical relations of power in the work of acquisition [to be] occulted” (The Predicament of Culture 220). Clifford suggests that museums avoid facing their own arbitrary constructions of meaning, through the mystification of objects in their “classification and display” (220). Time and order are treated as essential, unambiguous qualities that “erase the concrete social labor of [a collection’s] making” (220). Clifford questions the totality with which “temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge” (222) in objects, and is imbricated in a system of authenticity and authority that has been normalized for museum curators and visitors alike because of its reassuring position toward the future.

Clifford proposes that museums must recognize other ways of valuing objects when it comes to representing different cultures in non-dominative or imposing ways, since for some groups “it is not the object itself, but the community’s use of an object that lends it its significance” (Cobb 499). Clifford writes that to tell “local histories of cultural survival and emergence, we need to resist deep-seated habits of mind and systems of authenticity” (246). Museums must rigorously question the association of non-Western people with primitivism and ages past, either to devalue others’ ability to continue to exist in the present, or more perniciously to celebrate them as a necessary stage in the process toward (Western) modernity. Consequently, “we need to be suspicious of an almost-automatic tendency to relegate non-Western peoples and objects to the pasts of an increasingly homogeneous humanity” (246). This paper
suggests that museums as categories of knowledge and repositories of time can glorify material value and singular progressiveness, in the case of the Hall of Human Origins, but can also revivify cultural experiences inherited through Native American people, rather than objects, in the case of Our Peoples.

The art-culture collection and value systems developed in Western societies do not leave much room for the objects of the “other” to be appreciated on its independent terms, since marginality can be appropriated for material, symbolic, or ideological reasons to reify a dominant perspective. Clifford suggests that once authenticity is established and made visible as “something produced, not salvaged” (250), local history, myth, and memory can exist as “ongoing art forms that are both related to and separate from dominant systems of aesthetic-ethnographic value” (250; emphasis added). As such, alternative art and artifacts, and their collection, can function to “gather futures” (250) as they contribute to self-representation and include self-conscious attention to their own constructedness, instead of being relegated to the past.

The question of authenticity in museum displays is both important and controversial, and the two exhibits acknowledge and approach it differently. The Hall of Human Origins relies on extensive high-tech reconstructions, forensic evidence, and the comforting distance of time immemorial to authenticate the content of its displays. One of the NMAI’s central concerns, however, is portraying Native peoples’ lives in order to satisfy multiple expectations of authenticity, and thereby justify the authority of “community,” not trained, curators in a national museum. Therefore, the exhibits provide different responses to Spencer Crew and James Sims’ assertion that
“authenticity is not about factuality or reality, it is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do” (163), since the Hall celebrates and familiarizes its material collections, while some of Our Peoples’ most interesting “objects” are in fact texts about the museum’s intentions, cultural performances and interpretations by museum guides, and the lighting, sound, and space design for the exhibit as a whole.

Another concern raised in museum studies is the ability of static, material collections and external, ethnographic representation to describe and promote continuing lives and traditions. In “Objects of Ethnography,” Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett connects cultural sovereignty to political action and equality, since “having a past, a history, a ‘folklore’ of one’s own, and institutions to bolster these claims is fundamental to the politics of culture” (423). One approach, therefore, to ensure authenticity and authority is to aspire to participation in a national museum, as this is “a mark of being civilized” (423); an achievement that Native American groups have ostensibly accomplished. Nevertheless, critics of the NMAI4 asserted that the displays do not live up to the rigorous scholarship and theoretical foundation of Smithsonian Institution museums. Aldona Jonaitis and Janet Berlo claim that the preponderance of negative reviews for the NMAI at its opening reveal critics’ resistance to the possibility of seeing beyond and between stereotypical notions of American Indians as “ecologically oriented, highly folkloric, and the victims of a painful past” (212).

Therefore, the NMAI’s response to new museology’s negotiation of representing dynamic lives through static objects is to represent the friction between acceptable scholarly, objective history and personal, subjective “heritage,” and the subjects authorized to experience that history.

One way for museums to portray history is as a “living part of people’s sense of who they are” that is “understood and experienced by actors” (Kreamer 367). This benefits visitors who experience living, or at least active, opportunities to gain contextualized knowledge. Traditionally, museums “do not present the past as embodying issues and concerned related to the present” and therefore contemporary connections are stalled because “history is object seen as a series of discrete events rather than as the interrelationship over time of individuals and groups” (Kreamer 374). But history is more than what hides in books; it features events and emotions that continue into the present, can be affectively experienced, and actively transferred. The NMAI, for example, stresses both the continuity of Native peoples’ lives, traditions, contemporary experience and transmittal of this culture, and the crucial role that Native peoples play in making other people’s and countries’ history since contact with the Western hemisphere in 1492.

The NMAI’s strategy of using personal “memory, mythos, and history” (Kreamer 375) as authentic historical record and narrative responds to Pierre Nora’s criticism of the constant construction of memory as a safeguard against the traumas of the present and the chaotic unpredictability of the future. Nora distinguishes between “real memory” (“social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of
so-called primitive or archaic societies”) and history (“how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past”) in order to draw attention to the normalized “conquest and eradication of memory by history” (8) in diasporic, digitized, globalized societies. While “history belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority” and erasure of differences, memory “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects” (9). Nora thus suggests that museums function as “lieux de mémoire,” literal sites of memory, along with deliberate attempts to “create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (12).

Singular, finite, detached representations of history in museums are replacements for “spontaneous memory” (12), with history functioning as the mode that “organizes and structures all the spaces, acts, individual memories into a narrative that strives for continuity” (9) and therefore a false, uncritical sense of stability.

Nora also notes that the recent century’s frantic overproduction of archives and records signals the simultaneous postmodern nostalgia for a joyful past and disavowal of the primitivism of that same past (12). This becomes a way to assure the difference (and therefore, progress) between the past and the present. Peter Vergo addresses this phenomenon specifically in museums, identifying the eruption of museums exhibiting everything from art, culture, and science, to “entertainment, agriculture, rural life, childhood, fisheries, antiquities, automobiles: the list is endless” (1). The paradox, therefore, in the need to document and preserve things, is that if every object has a place in some museum, is that object really special, unique, and consistent with the codes of
aestheticism, material value, and age that dictate museum collections? Part of what the Smithsonian’s Natural History Museum and NMAI must negotiate is assuring the public that the collections retain some of that specialness and uniqueness associated with the prestige of their parent institution, while also embracing an equal-opportunity stance toward objects, thus at least partially acknowledging society’s changing, plural needs for preserved objects and records.

The Hall’s response to these problems is to promulgate a philosophy asserting that everyone is equal because everyone is genetically the same, and that celebrating our “uniqueness”—as exceptional communications skills, neurological development, and environmental control—emphasizes the general victory of Homo sapiens. The NMAI, however, is much more deliberate in considering this paradox. Specifically, it acknowledges the challenge of submitting to the standards of a traditional institution of oppression in order to legitimate its claims and placement on the National Mall, while also maintaining the particularity, differences, and uniqueness that constitute the very reasons that it deserves to be on the National Mall. In the following chapters, I suggest that the Hall of Human Origins forms its audience into a group that will reflect and reify the display’s ideology, while the NMAI offers its audience a strategy of readership and interpretation.

Perpetrating a permanent, uninterrupted vision of history is comforting to some but can occlude other groups’ differing, incompatible experiences of the past. Therefore, museums must negotiate a balance between pluralism and separatism, broad inclusivity and specialized inside knowledge. Criticism against the traditional
encyclopedic art-cultural museum that purports to tell a version of “everyone’s” story suggests “it is dangerously easy to appear to celebrate shared experiences while actually selecting exhibiting themes that implicitly support shared claims to superiority by the dominant culture” (Lavine 141). The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, and particularly the Hall of Human Origins, attempts to subordinate cultural and social differences and instead focus on a cross-cultural, universal experience. The exhibit reiterates that categories of race, nation, and culture are superficial when stacked against the biological, natural, instinctual unity that dates back thousands of years. This exemplifies the idea that “many communities would prefer celebrating their distant past to examining their present circumstances” (Lavine 142), and that museums provide this easy narrative for their visitors.

The Hall of Human Origins constructs a unified version of history to reflect coherence on the community of visitors in the exhibition. It assumes that “participation in civil society requires a set of shared understandings, which in turn create a meeting ground of cultures,” while the self-curated NMAI exhibitions “assume that if we are joined, it is through the contestation and confrontation of ideas” (Lavine 155). The Hall of Human Origins projects a false sense of neutrality through its treatment of ancient—salvaged, not produced—materials, but all public exhibits, no matter their content, is driven by the combined influences of “object’s producer, the exhibitor’s arrangement and display of the objects, and the assumptions of the museumgoer” (Karp and Lavine 14). Therefore, the Hall of Human Origins and Our Peoples exhibits perform a contradictory balancing act—between preserving the collections, maintaining a
designated constituency, as attracting larger/different publics, pleasing corporate
sponsors, and supporting behind-the-scenes outreach and research—that complicates
the possibilities of unity or diversity in the display choices and their backing ideologies.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that generously inclusive practices of
perpetuating a “unity-in-diversity discourse can also have a neutralizing effect” (433),
implying that the attempts to erase difference among the people creating the exhibitions,
those represented by them, and those viewing the representations are ultimately unjust
to at least one of the groups involved. Correspondingly, new museology is very
concerned with representation of and from people with alternate, non-national, non-
traditional histories. The validity and ethics of ethnographic authority, with which the
interpretive, monoglossic voice of a trained fieldworker infiltrates a group in order to
gain an “authentic,” but singular perspective on its culture, is of the significant concern
in art, cultural, and historical exhibitions. According to Clifford, ethnographic authority
is “both scientifically validated and based on a unique personal experience” (The
Predicament of Culture 26), making it a hybrid form of journalistic and interpretive
communication. Clifford traces the trajectory of ethnography as an academic discipline
and as active fieldwork involving both objective observation and subjective experience.
Ethnographic interpretation “contributes to an increasing visibility of the creative (and
in a broad sense poetic) processes by which “cultural” objects are invented and treated
as meaningful” (38), and therefore draws attention to the larger constructedness of
culture and the apparatuses perpetuating it. However, ethnography is still concentrated
in the discourse of an outsider who makes up his or her own authority to write about another group.

New museology demands the defamiliarization of ethnographic authority and questioning the authority of an educated outsider to reduce whole cultures to a few “representative” sentences. Consequently, “it becomes necessary to conceive of [new] ethnography not as the experience and interpretation of a circumscribed ‘other’ reality, but rather as a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects” (41). Changes to ethnographic practices involve engaging the “discursive paradigms of dialogue and polyphony” (41) and acknowledging that “the invention of culture” is “plural and beyond the control of any individual” (50). While Clifford discusses revisions to ethnographic production, he also directs a critique toward its consumption by cultural scholars, and museum visitors.

Since ethically representative ethnography demands plural authorship, it correspondingly requires plurality in its readership. Indeed, for Clifford this is the most important part of revising ethnographic practices because “the ability of a text to make sense in a coherent way depends less on the willed intentions of an originary author than on the creative activity of a reader” (52).

Interpretations of cultural artifacts, narratives, and exhibitions are beyond the intention and even imagination of the creators and curators, producing both the possibility of oppressive misconstrual, and that of productive open-endedness. The creation of ethnography may be “an unruly, multi-subjective activity” that is “given coherence in particular acts of reading” but there is always “a variety of possible
readings (beyond merely individual appropriations), readings beyond the control of any single authority” (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* 53). Rather than quashing alternative interpretations, museum displays can embrace them as examples of the ambiguity of historical, art, and even scientific production. The Hall of Human Origins’ portrayal of humanity’s triumphant teleology does not allow for any interpretation other than a united belief in the determinist victory of *Homo sapiens*. However, the NMAI clearly steps outside of its historical narratives to directly address the visitors regarding how to read parts of the museum, how parts of the museum’s historical perspective was created, and the possibilities for continuing the reader interpretation and consumption beyond its walls. In the next chapters, I suggest that the Hall of Human Origins presents an ideal, uniform model of docile, supportive, and positivist visitors in its display of those visitors’ ancestors, while the NMAI offers its audience a critical and potentially argumentative strategy of readership and interpretation.

I address the concerns raised by the new museology movement in two chapters corresponding to each museum exhibit, and consider a third proposed museum—the “Museum of the American People”\(^5\)—in the conclusion as a future manifestation of the possibilities and pitfalls for museums creating authentic cultural experiences in technology-laden, globalized societies and sharing the oppressive power of bestowing identity through representation. In Chapter One, I rely on a close reading of Roland Barthes’ “Great Family of Man,” a critique of the 1957 photography exhibit, to frame

\(^5\) Sam Eskenazi’s proposed museum is described in Manuel Roig-Franzia’s 2011 *Washington Post* article, “On the Mall, homage to the melting pot?”
my own considerations of how the Hall of Human Origins constructs inclusion and
unity for its visitors and embeds a sense of equality that also functions as an expectation
of superiority. Barthes critiques the “Great Family of Man” exhibit’s strategies of
feigning inclusion, equalizing aesthetic and political representation, and essentializing
human History into Nature. The “Great Family of Man” accomplishes this by
aestheticizing instances of “universal” human experience, thus indexing human
differences under unified and neutral “Nature.” Barthes argues that such strategies for
proliferating and publicizing the “Family of Man” exhibition benefit from and reify an
escapist ignorance in which erasing differences among human groups really attempts to
elide injustices perpetrated between them.

Fifty years after the use of photography in the “Family of Man,” the Hall of
Human Origins implements a universalizing ideology through very different media. In
particular, I identify the exhibit’s use of popular interactive media—including visitor
participation in social media, and the inauguration of the Smithsonian’s first mobile
app—and the misapplication of categories of scientific and cultural knowledge. The
exhibit’s displays of biological, archaeological, and technological research and evidence
tell one story of genetic similarity, while glorifying and essentializing that scientific
“fact” into a narrative of human choice, victory, and triumph. I also question whether
this attempt to “tell everyone’s story” is narrowing or reductive of alternative
epistemologies and experiences, and if it constitutes another method for encyclopedic
museums to steamroll and interpellate a larger public under a certain agenda.
Indeed, museums and their visitors seem to exist only in an inescapable dialectical relationship. Museums tell people what they should care about and how they should value objects, cultures (and consequently other people), but they must also tell a story that is positive for and relatable to as many visitors as possible. Museums therefore both provide designated meaning and value for their visitors, and fulfill visitors’ ideals and values in their exhibitions. Chapter Two, however, suggests that the NMAI attempts to break this dialectic in its self-conscious development of alternative curation and representation strategies to encompass multiple perspectives of history and the restitution of cultural sovereignty and identity. In particular, I focus on the backbone of the Our Peoples exhibit, which curator Paul Chaat Smith calls “the raison d’être for the existence of the museum itself” (132). The ideologies behind Our Peoples is “firmly within postmodern and postcolonial discourses on the reflexivity and plurality of histories” and as such is not directly and discretely about Native American singular facts, but instead responds to the “preexisting European system of meaning” and relocates “Native voices in the discourses that reverse ideas about the colonized as victim” (Isaac 255). Therefore, the ultimate goal of the curators is “to question our ethnocentric ideas about history itself” (Isaac 255).

In Chapter Two, I focus on a text by curators Paul Chaat Smith and Herbert Rosen displayed alongside seventeen George Catlin portraits that deconstructs the expected linear history of Native peoples traditionally told through “in-depth anthropological displays of individual cultures” in the “objective, anonymous third-person voice of the ‘expert’” (Jonaitis and Berlo 211). In offering “eloquent fragments
of various realities” (225), the Our Peoples exhibit deliberately fractures visitors’
conception of material value, objective truth, and authoritative representation, but
delivers instead a potential strategy of readership, critical awareness, and consumption
that is portable and applicable beyond the museum’s constructed narratives.

This thesis addresses the display choices and practices, and visitors’
consumption and interpretations, of two Smithsonian museum exhibits with differing
content and agendas. Keeping in mind my opening example of the Museum of Jurassic
Technology’s deliberate manipulation of museums’ power to present ethical and
truthful representations of cultural-historical narratives and its destabilization of
visitors’ implicit trust in and neutral perception of museums, I start from the idea that
there are latent intentions and interpretations below museums’ objective, material,
formalized displays. I therefore examine the varyingly interactive, totalizing, normative,
and alienating strategies and technologies with which the Hall of Human Origins and
the Our Peoples exhibits engage their visitors, and how they address the possibility that
“history is created, constructed, and controlled” (Isaac 255).
CHAPTER ONE
DISPLAYING INCLUSION AND DEMANDING Interaction AT THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY’S HALL OF HUMAN ORIGINS

The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History put four years and $20.7 million into the Hall of Human Origins to recreate a cast of modern humans’ closest relatives and thus “break down the traditional barriers between visitors and the sometimes dry scientific material” (O’Sullivan). Indeed, in their interactions with these recreated objects, visitors are “encouraged to touch them, climb on them, even embrace them,” and “look deep into their eyes [to] feel a kind of personal connection” (O’Sullivan). As curator Rick Potts proclaims, “How can you break [the distance] down more than by hugging one of your relatives?” (qtd. in O’Sullivan). In the Hall of Human Origins, righteous and self-assured unity is intended, and enforced, to the soundtrack of a voice intoning “We are all one species” in the introductory video.

The video display at the entrance to the exhibit reveals the concept underlying the entire exhibit: “we” are all one biological species, united by common ancestors if we go back far enough in time, and therefore equalized by neutral biological-geological time. The video explains that the first hominid species developed in Africa, and that all human origins can be traced to the divergence between humans and chimpanzees, and the subsequent bifurcation and diversification of the species line around 7 million years ago until Homo sapiens emerged 200,000 years ago. It also invites viewers to go into the exhibit with the assurance, amplified by the diverse talking heads of all ages and
races onscreen, that race is a construct rather than a difference, and that “they” contribute to a “we” who are all one species.

This exhibit’s design and intention evokes Edward Steichen’s famed “Family of Man” photograph exhibition first displayed in 1955 in New York’s MOMA, which subsequently traveled the world and provided both argument and evidence for what it means to be human and belong to one family. The choice of photography as the aesthetic yet mechanical medium to prove the universality of human experience elevates both that experience and its documentation to relatable authenticity. What is the value in this vehicle of representation? It is arguably both an accurate, “realistic” medium, as well as a form of aesthetic production that is more highly fetishized than commodities that can be consumed. As an art form, it is more likely to be displayed, shared, and visible to many more people. The aestheticization of human unity is therefore more appealing and respected than other educative and discursive forms.

The use of art photography to communicate this unity and universality differs considerably from relying on documentary film, a New York Times editorial, or an article published in a scholarly journal reporting biological data, although all these media have ostensibly wide audiences. The visual but static display asserts that visibility is more universally comprehended than literacy, but also that static images are easier to understand and remember. Nevertheless, the dominance of aestheticized evidence presumes that the expectations and values related to representative art are universal to ensure that all who view the exhibition experience it in an equal and unified manner; in the manner which it was intended and prescribed to elicit. Deviations from
this acceptance and appreciation constitute gaps in the validity of the purportedly universal exhibition. Relying on photography implies that the exhibit’s claims of representation do not require quantifiable scientific evidence since it is art and therefore subjective, but that its visibility, understandability, and lifelikeness similarly do not need qualifying since seeing is believing, and its claims are therefore objectively and authentically true.

The Hall of Human Origins attempts so great a pluralism for its constituency that its representations veer toward essentialism, eliding all differences in order to erase all injustices. In his Mythologies essay “The Great Family of Man,” Roland Barthes makes a similar argument regarding the “Family of Man” exhibition when it traveled to France in 1956. During this time, the United States’ and Western Europe’s age of “hard,” political imperialism was arguably dissipating, and nations that no longer had direct political investment in other countries amplified the power to define and proscribe cultures of others through museum and other cultural-educational institutions instead. As the threat of decolonization violence became abstract and distanced, and a uniquely fought “cold” war set in, Western society’s “enemy” or “other” became non-immediate and almost invisible, thereby allowing for more (superficially at least) magnanimous representations of “others” via aestheticization and naturalization.

Barthes describes this project as taking form through the Family of Man exhibition that strove to show “the universality of human actions in the daily life of all the countries of the world,” since these actions result in and normalize the same types of “behavior” (100). Barthes thus claims that phenomena such as “birth, death, work,
knowledge, [and] play” are treated as human “behavior,” rather than actionable, constructed, and circumstantial events. The universality, therefore, in the “Family of Man does not attempt to address cultural production and experience, but instead relies primarily on temporal, biological events such as birth and death, implying that the study of humans is simply one of many life cycles.

Barthes traces the change in the exhibition’s title from the American “Family of Man” to his experience in France with “La Grande Famille d’Homme,” charging that the addition of one word changed the intent of the entire exhibition, and its subsequent interpretation. This qualification of the Family of Man—“grande” implying both large and inclusive in terms of participants (literally, the entire planet) and grand, noble, great, and distinguished—represents a shift from “what could originally pass for a phrase belonging to zoology, keeping only the similarity in behavior [and] the unity of a species” (100) to a sentimental, historical, moral, cultural, and ultimately political imperative of glorifying that family of man. The added adjective thus sets the scene for visitors to encounter something of high value that is due great respect, made even greater because of the inclusiveness of the exhibition. The title dictates to visitors that they are about to see something considered great, and reinforces this expectation since the visitors themselves, as humans, reflect this greatness back toward the exhibit’s content. This ensures unequivocal identification with the “ambiguous myth of the human community” that, according to Barthes, “serves as an alibi to a large part of our humanism” (100).
Barthes evokes the myth of humanism as an “alibi” to explain its function as a false, constructed, paltry excuse for other factors that are much more important, serious, or dangerous. The myth of humanist, egalitarian ideology functions as a contemporary alibi for all past actions and injustices, and attempts to overcompensate for these actions by broadly encompassing as many representations of humanity as possible. It functions, Barthes explains, in two stages; in the first of which, “the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, the infinite variations of the species [and] the diversity in skins, skulls, and customs are made manifest, [and] the image of Babel is complacently projected over that of the world” (100). Acknowledging these differences creates a cultic privilege of uniqueness and implies the impossibility of equal and ethical representation for all subjects in their individuality. From this seemingly impossible situation, the power of the “Family of Man” to represent all its objects and affect all its subjects seems nothing short of miraculous; indeed, Barthes asserts, “from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically”—alchemically, arbitrarily, ambiguously—“produced” (100). In claiming to represent and celebrate every difference and divergence stemming across geography, appearance, culture, and language, unity is founded on the fact that “man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way,” shaped by a common mould. Nature trumps ethnicity, biological and behavioral similarities negate cultural and historical change, and at this empirical point God is paradoxically “reintroduced into our exhibition: the diversity of men proclaims his power, his richness; the unity of their gestures demonstrates his will”
A Western Christian ideology of morality is thus perpetuated alongside the aesthetic ideology evidently present in a photography exhibition.

The exhibition’s intent and interpretation are sublimated through multiple channels—religious bases, aesthetic valorization, and biological evidence—to show both pluralism and unity, aesthetic value and biological truth, and equality and superiority for those who can benevolently support equality. The exhibition attempts to successfully convey a sense of a united, distinguished “Family of Man” because, as Barthes suggests, time is neutralized and history is ignored throughout the exhibit as an extraneous artifice that muddles the similarities of all human behavior. While the temporality of the displayed objects is mostly anaesthetized by the photographic medium, the exhibition’s captioning exploits the legitimating power of time passed and age accumulated. The exhibition included quotations of “‘primitive’ proverbs or verses from the Old Testament,” the age and distance of which claim “an eternal wisdom,” and assure them to be “a class of assertions which escape History” (101). Despite the idealistic claims that all humans are equal and have been since their evolution into the supreme human species, referencing or examining History inevitably illustrates the differences and inequalities that have characterized human treatment and behavior over time and into the present. The proverbs and verses chosen to accompany the exhibition must escape the damning influence of history in order to be universal, neutral, and to positively reaffirm the unity of all humans.

As such, these quotations are “gnomic truths” that allow for the “meeting of all the ages of humanity at the most neutral point of their nature” (101). They express
truths that are basic enough to represent most humans, but are so vague and enigmatic to avoid any strong particularity to any one group or culture. The use of proverbs that express obvious truths or phenomena implies that their value results from the authority and authenticity imparted by their age and consequent durability, since the “obviousness of the truism has no longer any value except in the realm of a purely ‘poetic’ language” (101). These gnomic proverbs circumvent comprehending and representing human behavior by appealing to the fetishized, neutralizing power of time to erase the trauma of human actions and mistreatment. They avoid history because of its unstable relationship as a signifier to its referent—between what “actually” happened or is happening, and how that is represented. Barthes condemns the curators’ reliance on these mystifying proverbs and their blindly universalizing claims of unity and justice based on photographs, claiming that “the content and appeal of the pictures, [and] the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History” (101). The role of history in constructing and subverting museum representations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, but in “The Great Family of Man,” its absence reifies dominant perspectives by erasing political and differences and grievances and devaluing its uncomfortable truths in the public, safe, edifying museum sphere.

The “Family of Man” exhibit attempts both to legitimate its claims in terms of scientific, empirical claims of behavioral similarity as well as to conceal its own ahistorical and apolitical approach by appealing to an aesthetic and sentimental nostalgia that superficially satisfies visitors in their self-identification and in their
comprehension of others. Barthes contends that viewers are “held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality” (101) from configuring human existence as imbalanced rather than equal; as phenomenological rather than ideal. The recourse to aesthetic representation and sentimentality prevents viewers “from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behavior where historical alienation introduces some ‘differences’ which we shall here quite simply call ‘injustices’” (101). In other words, human actions and behavior have never been inclusive, egalitarian, and non-discriminatory, but historical evidence for cruel, biased, and estranging forms of behavior only ruptures the illusion of unity and cohesion by illuminating the differences, and therefore injustices, in groups’ and cultures’ actions.

Barthes identifies the sentimentality of assuming human unity, the avoidance of the destabilizing force of history, and the reliance on the denaturing power of passing time as three strategies contributing to the humanist myth of the great “Family of Man.” This mystification functions by “placing Nature at the bottom of History” (101) which suggests that the bedrock of all human interaction and injustice is a universal, uncontrollable, essential element: Nature. Classical humanist impulses blithely assure that “one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature” just by scratching away the insignificant history of humanity, which is only “the relativity of their institutions, or the superficial diversity of their skin.” This elevates Nature as the definitive force behind human action which no one can control or is responsible for, and also elevates it as the equalizer and unifier which can absorb all the blame for injustices between humans. Similarly, claiming one only has to scratch at history “a little”
disregards how history has shaped human difference and dissonance and minimizes its function as the controllable, actionable record of how humans have treated each other. This denies its power to attest to discrimination, disparity, and domination.

Barthes’ reclamation of humanism and his optimistic trajectory for rebalancing the hierarchy of nature and history is invoked through a call for “progressive humanism” (101). This humanism operates through the same perspective that empowers humans’ own values and actions for mutual satisfaction and fulfillment in life, while also recognizing that those values are dynamic and interactively determined, and therefore often contradict with other humans’ conceptions of life. Such life values were therefore not naturally or elementally instilled in early hominids and guaranteed to be passed down throughout millennia to contemporary humans. Accordingly, Barthes beseeches progressive humanism to debunk the “very old imposture” of natural determinism and “constantly to scour Nature, its ‘laws’ and its ‘limits’ in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical” (101). The implication is therefore not that history and nature are discrete forces and sites of human action or that one must supersede the other for the family of man’s continued progress, but that the idealized and neutral version of nature does not excuse or deny the historically-felt consequences of humans’ exceptional and abhorrent actions alike.

Ironically, the examples that establish nature to be historical, and thus support Barthes’ argument and dismantle the myth of the Family of Man, are those that are propounded within the exhibit itself. “Examples?” Barthes rhetorically queries, and responds with “birth, death” as the privileged constructs of universality. Obviously, the
argument for the historicity of nature does not deny that birth and death “are facts of nature, universal facts.” Nevertheless, “if one removes History from them,” as the exhibition strives to do, Barthes explains “there is nothing more to be said about them” (101) and they can fulfill their function as purely aesthetic devices to be displayed. To have birth and death representing the most natural and universal facts is “purely tautological”: a person is “born” and “dies” because an arbitrarily quantifiable amount of time passes in between these two “facts,” but this time passes and is legitimated as life by that person being alive to bear witness to and label it as such. Therefore, the exhibition’s recourse to images of life and death is rendered redundant and meaningless in the construction of the happily unified human family.

Barthes suggests that this is a major failing of the exhibit, since it perpetuates a simplistic, superficial ideology of what a life is, and also devalues the medium of this message, photography, as one only capable of expressing static representations of life and death. Accordingly, “the failure of photography [seems] to be flagrant in this connection: to reproduce death or birth tells us, literally, nothing” (101). What could have been one of the strengths of the exhibit—photography’s journalistic ability to faithfully render an image of life instantly recognizable and realistic—is in this context useless, and even damning. The ability of photography to mechanically reproduce these elements suggests that the naturalness and stability of life and death is immutable; however, these facts can only be meaningful and qualifiable for humans when they are “inserted into a category of knowledge which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalness to our human criticism.” By representing
“universal” human behaviors through photography, a supposedly accurate and irreproachable medium of displaying life, the authority of Nature denies any mediation between the truth of human life and its photographic representation, thereby subverting any “signs of a historical writing.”

History does not seem to have much influence in the natural and biological phenomena of offspring always being born, but against the backdrop of “the whole mass of the human problem,” identifying and promoting the “essence” of this process is not as important as investigating the modes, the conditions, and the particularity of being born, which are fundamentally “perfectly historical” (102). Consequently, Barthes’ critique of the “Family of Man” ascends in a fervent, direct reprimand of the “eternal lyricism of birth” that the exhibition illustrates. The display avoids characterizing the problems and differences of life after birth by focusing on the constancy of birth after lyrical birth, each more beautiful than the last. Barthes suggests instead that visitors should demand to know “whether or not the child is born with ease or difficulty, whether or not his birth causes suffering to his mother, whether or not he is threatened by a high mortality rate, whether or not such and such a type of future is open to him” (102) from public, educational, aesthetic displays such as the “Family of Man.” The actions and consequences following the miraculous moment of birth are the markers of humanity’s unity or disorder, and thus cannot be elided in favor of less problematic representations.

Barthes submits death to the same demystifying treatment as birth, charging that photography’s aestheticization of death encourages people to comfortably “celebrate its
essence once more, and thus risk forgetting that there is still so much we can do to fight it” (102). This aestheticization and reification in the great collection turns the “essence” of death into something natural and inevitable, and therefore not worth fighting or taking action. While death is as old and constant as life, new powers to stave it off and extend life have developed, and these are what should be encouraged, according to Barthes. These newer technologies and medical advances are not equally available to everyone; therefore they represent evidence of the injustices and imbalances in human lives, and are not included in an exhibition of unified identity. This exclusion eases the discomfort of visitors who know that the differences in life for people of varying socioeconomic levels, cultures, and nationalities mean more than the similarities of their biological deaths. Nevertheless, Barthes explains it is the “very young, far too young power” of extending equal life “that we must exalt, and not the sterile identity of ‘natural’ death” (102). The exhibition must acknowledge this troubling truth, which cannot be accomplished while the display postulates the equal importance of birth and death, and ignores the inequalities in between these phenomena.

Similarly, the exhibition places “work” as one of those “natural facts” that unifies all humans’ lives just as birth and death do. Barthes criticizes the way in which “work” in general is portrayed as belonging to “the same order of fate” as birth and death, which signals the complacency with which the exhibition’s organizers, its implied Western visitors, and their accompanying humanist ideology treat the idea of labor. “Work” is seen as something determined and essential, which denies the very different conditions and consequences of work for laborers around the world. While
“work” is an age-old fact, it is not and has never been a universal element in peoples’ lives; as such, its age “does not in the least prevent it from remaining a perfectly historical fact” (102). Barthes claims that the exhibition’s unifying, universalizing imperative intends to benevolently “confuse in a purely gestural identity the colonial and the Western worker,” downplaying the biological and cultural differences in work’s “modes, motivations, ends, and benefits” and therefore neutralizing its political differences and implications (102).

These problems develop when certain systems of valuing work are imposed on different groups, or when one monopolizes others, which Barthes recognizes as Western capitalism’s broad and general encroachment on all other systems of trade and labor. Barthes points out that “we know very well that work is ‘natural’ just as long as it is ‘profitable,’ and that in modifying the inevitability of the profit, we shall perhaps one day modify the inevitability of labor” (102). A certain concept of “work”—laboring to produce something which is taken away, with wages being paid for the human body’s subjection to time and commodification—is constructed as an essential, natural fact in order to erase the artificiality of this imposition, and the arbitrariness of positing that one person’s profit is another’s inevitable essence. Consequently, Barthes rails against the exhibition for privileging the “eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures” rather than engaging this “entirely historified work” that creates discrepancies and inequalities in the great “Family of Man” (102).

Barthes sums up his apprehension that the Family of Man exhibition displays its photographic evidence to provide “the alibi of a ‘wisdom’ and a ‘lyricism’” to the
“immobility of the world” which makes “the gestures of man look eternal the better to defuse them” (102). Accordingly, the choice of photography as the medium for display supports the conception of a static, frozen world that has not changed over time, and cannot change in the future. By casting “the gestures of man” as “eternal,” and relying on the naturalization of history, the exhibition aims to defuse, or neutralize, the real, actionable, political differences and discrepancies felt in human lives. Denying these differences means supporting a status quo, and drawing attention away from any closer examination of, or action against, the inequalities in humans’ experience of this stasis. The exhibition both relies on and reifies the “immobility of the world” in a tactic which privileges stability and unity. It posits that everything has always functioned in the same way, and will continue thus because it is “natural”—either biologically or transcendentally determined. Therefore, claims to examine how peoples’ experiences are different and how things have changed (and, consequently, calls for change) are cast as useless and naive against the myth of stability and equality.

Fifty years on, the creators of the exhibits at the Hall of Human Origins undertake the different task of assimilating human history and experience by privileging the unassailability of biological and paleontological evidence. The exhibit maintains the universality of human experience by temporalizing and objectifying that experience with prehistoric artifactual evidence that is made to stand in for cultural production. By emphasizing the universality of biological existence, the exhibit erases the primacy of cultural differences and injustices. However, as the success of Steichen’s exhibition emphasizes, artistic-cultural forms of representation seem to claim more universal,
understandable, and easily consumable supremacy in a museum setting. Therefore, the Hall of Human Origins blurs the distinction between biological existence and cultural experience in order to communicate the scientific narrative of unity. This strategy, alongside the prominent use of interactive media and technology in and beyond the museum’s walls, constitutes the exhibit’s attempts to interpellate all visitors into the universal “Family of Man” and provide artistic and biological representation of every visitor’s history.

The Hall of Human Origins posits peoples’ unity and similarities in the most broadly inclusive way: by going back in time as far as humanly (literally) possible, and by basing its claims on biological and geological evidence of human existence. The encyclopedic inclusivity of the exhibit’s subjects and objects attempts to circumvent any possibility of visitors seeing “others” in the displays against whom to differentiate and hierarchize themselves. It also erases any protest of cultural specificity or exclusion, and any criticism of imposing an artificial and arbitrary history on visitors by engaging in a distant but omnipresent memory of collective ancestry. The exhibit’s development therefore mimes a response to Tony Bennett’s critique of visual displays in museums that “organized [an] implied public…into a unity, representationally effacing divisions within the body politic in constructing a ‘we’ conceived as the realization, and therefore just beneficiaries, of the process of evolution and identified as a unity in opposition to the primitive otherness” (79) of the subjects on display. The Hall of Human Origins’ mission organizes its visitors into an implied public, self-identifying as a unity, to assure that all “others” become the same and thus show a collective, universal past with
which everyone can connect. The viewing public must therefore be unified in order to ensure that all visitors identify with their “ancestors” on display.

Bennett argues that through the “construction of a radically different other, the exhibition of other peoples served as a vehicle for the edification of a national public” (79) and confirmed that public’s own superiority as it became normalized. The Hall of Human Origins, which avoids identifying biological or political “others,” nevertheless situates viewers’ superiority in a progress narrative whose “others” exist only as fossilized relics. In other words, the exhibit does not have to rely on the construction of a “radically different other” because if it is a successful representation, then visitors will know that the “other” always already existed in themselves, but in a radically different time which (de)values human experience. The Hall creates a unified public that sees itself in all of the artifacts, visual displays, and technological props, thus reifying Bennett’s exhibitionary complex, which implies that both subjects and all objects are mutually constructed, exhibited, and knowable.

The exhibit allows all its visitors, “en masse rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge” (63). Yet this strategy is only successful when the objects of knowledge are people and things that are too far removed in time and space to be subjectively, historically, or humanly known. Visitors are therefore subjects of knowledge because no objects representing knowable human experience exist from 195,000 years ago. The positioning of human origins as the common knowledge and network of all humans alive today allows visitors “to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the
subjects and objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows” (63). Ultimately, visitors’ ability (or power) to know the past and themselves proves, in an almost Cartesian tautology, that they have successfully completed the process of becoming human and therefore have won a definitive, teleological victory of development that started with the evolution of early hominids. All that happened afterward, the display seems to imply, is simply embellishment furnishing a universal, self-satisfied human life. The museum frame empowers this display of the simultaneously self-evident and unconscionable phenomenon of universality by ensuring that visitors know themselves “as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation” (63). Therefore, the power of the museum display dictates that unified humanity evolved from certain origins, and visitors must discipline and regulate themselves in order to fulfill the exhibit’s claim of their own superiority.

The Hall’s collection and content insist on visual, tangible evidence of inclusion for its visitors. This inclusion is both (paradoxically) portable beyond the museum’s walls and can be integrated into visitors’ modern external lives, while also constituting permanent, and therefore more binding and sincere, evidence of being included in an official display. The latter offers the proof and privilege of inclusion in a systematized institution, and the former is the ability to show off this inclusion to the outer world; together, they rely on and exemplify the pervasiveness of the exhibitionary complex. As Bennett explains, the complex turns the gaze back from the exhibition to those viewing the display, and enhances a certain perceived unity in the viewers. Since the material
displayed in the Hall of Human Origins is purported to be physically, genealogically, and historically related to its viewers, the viewers’ unity reflects back cohesion and affirmation towards the content of the display. The viewer is constructed as both subject and object of the exhibition through a tangible sense of inclusion into the material of the display to grant the exhibition its own cohesion and universality. The success of this inclusion is guaranteed in two ways: through the use of multiple interactive media, and through the transformation of biological-geological phenomena into cultural markers and events.

The exhibit’s strategies of expanding the display’s content beyond its objective lessons and outside its physical walls involve the use of several interactive technologies. These include a photo booth set up so visitors can take photos “with a Neanderthal,” the Smithsonian’s first-ever mobile app called “MEanderthal” that instructs visitors to “Transform yourself into an early human,” an opportunity to find where “you” are on the “Human Family Tree” visual display (and pose with it as if it represented a long-awaited family reunion), QR codes on signs throughout the exhibit to link visitors to the website, a feature on the website to ask the curators a question and have it become part of the exhibition, and a space on the website for visitors to share their answer for what it means to be human—in 140 characters or less, creating a Twitter handle of humanity—and see these responses incorporated into the displays (Smithsonian Institution).

The Hall of Human Origins display and website provide some possible answers to the question, “What does it mean to be human,” including walking upright, using language and symbols, and developing a social life. However, the website also
encourages visitors to “Ask us a question! Use the contact form to ask your question about our work and you may see your question -- and answer -- on this website, or in the 'Evolution FAQ' kiosk in the David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins” (Smithsonian Institution). The contact form (found at http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/involvement/being-human) also displays a tag cloud of common phrases in other peoples’ responses to this question, and shows these responses lower on the page, with a rating scale of five possible stars next to each answer. To be human, apparently, involves the ability to critique and rate other peoples’ opinions of what their own humanity means.

Individuals’ responses and engagements with the ideas behind the exhibition are made quantifiable and ratable, and their value is expressed and judged through multiple avenues of consumption and expression beyond the museum sphere. This technology exemplifies Bennett’s description of the developing “technology of vision” incorporated into museum displays that makes the crowd (visitors) the ultimate spectacle “by rendering it visible to itself” (68) in multiple, expanding mediums, while also affirming the ability of the display to present a unified history that can incorporate every visitor into it—and even provide photographic evidence of it (see figure 1).

The second strategy of display in the Hall of Human Origins that ensures the interpretation and acknowledgment of human equality to consolidate an assimilated public audience is the construction and representation of certain biological-geological (broadly put, “scientific) phenomena into cultural markers and events (i.e., “art”). Even though few records for such events exist, the exhibition promotes the museal cult of
aesthetic and cultural superiority by reinscribing existing biological and geological phenomena as cultural markers of dominance and progress for visitors. Lacking the crutch of cultural production to visually appeal to visitors’ expectations and values, the exhibition artificially creates and incongruously includes cultural accomplishments and phenomena with biological/geological evidence. Cultural objects are therefore privileged for their ability to unify visitors’ understanding of an a-cultural, a-historical narrative. Socio-cultural developments and achievements are forced into comparison with biological/geological time in order to legitimate the latter, and render it more easily

Figure 1. Sample MEanderthal portrait using mobile app technology. Personal photograph by author. 18 Feb. 2012.
understandable and relatable to ensure that visitors unilaterally accept the rhetoric of a unified and equal human experience. This reassuring sprinkling of cultural elements—which visitors not only easily recognize but also highly prize—among the biological/geological phenomena eases visitors’ acceptance of an unproblematic, familial human experience, which effaces difference by relying on the neutrality of time and empiricism. This functions according to Barthes’ explanation of the “Great Family of Man” exhibit’s recourse to “Nature.”

Barthes excoriates the “Great Family of Man” for promoting a passively neutral “Nature” to represent human life rather than acknowledging and analyzing the historical situations that contribute to the inequalities and injustices that people experience in their interconnected human groups. The Hall of Human Origins, interpreted here as a reproduction of the Family of Man fifty years after Barthes’ critique, differs considerably in both its guiding intention and its manifest display. While Steichen’s exhibit consisted of “art” and aestheticized representations of varying levels of value, the Hall of Human Origins’ meaning and authority is based in its artifactual collections and reconstructions which provide “scientific” evidence. This approach to representing human experience posits a more secular version of unity than did the Family of Man’s “human essence” (Barthes 100), in which “God [was] reintroduced in our Exhibition” with “the diversity of men proclaim[ing] his power, his richness; the unity of their gestures demonstrate[ing] his will” (100). Instead, the Hall of Human Origins introduces science into the exhibition to illuminate a unified “human essence” validated by the age and durability of biological-geological evidence. This authority is
incontrovertible both because of the amount of time passed between its objects (then) and its subjects (now), and because of the empirical, technological legitimation of genetics and biometrics which claim statistical similarity—“the DNA of all modern humans is 99.9% identical,” the introductory video tells us—as the basis of human essence and equality.

Human history, cultural experience, circumstantial action and choice, and differences and injustices are set against the indisputable permanence and self-evident truth of geological time, marked by the undeniable stability of fossils, which embody both life and static durability. Culture—that which, according to Barthes, marks not only human difference but, implicitly, human injustice—is subsumed by the authority of biology and geology, and the precedence of authenticating temporality in the Hall of Human Origins display. Thus, the foundational truth upon which the whole exhibit is based—that we are all one species and all one family—privileges statistical validity over human action and experience, and then veils that cold hard scientism by superimposing cultural phenomena over and against the biological-geological models.

While it is infinitely desirable that institutions with the funding, authority, and cultural clout such as the Smithsonian blaze the trail toward interdisciplinariness in museum exhibitions and education, and intersectionality in their topics and materials, the Hall of Human Origins amalgamates certain forms of information to make a specific agenda more palatable to visitors; one which is decidedly singular rather than hybrid. This objective is to present, in the broadest, most neutral way possible, a narrative of human origins with a particular predetermined and glorified endpoint representing universal
human experience. By focusing on a singular chronology, all differing experiences of time, history, and knowledge that are outside or between that progress narrative—the circumstantial, differential, cultural issues and injustices—are subsumed and ignored, and the ultimate objective truth (that we are all “one species”) becomes sufficient for addressing injustice and inequality among peoples today.

The vast oversimplification and willful ignorance of the political, representational, and cultural dissimilarities and discrimination among people is made more acceptable through the aestheticization and acculturation of the human species’ narrative of dominance and unity. This process can be most clearly traced in three elements of the exhibit: the introductory video which portrays evolution as a legend of heroic action and survival by Homo sapiens; the prized collection of sculptural reconstructions of early hominid faces by “paleoartist” John Gurche; and the manipulation of timelines to translate “hard” scientific facts and dates into subjective, cultural phenomena. These display and interpretive choices connect to the exhibition’s goal to use “science as a foundation to help appreciate our own unique development as human beings” (Smithsonian Institution), simultaneously embracing and praising “uniqueness” as the creative, cognitive, artistic ability that separates homo sapiens from other hominids, while also explaining away all human experience as biologically identical, and thus erasing cultural differences.

Visitors are introduced to the exhibit with a four-minute video shown at the entrance of the hall which tells the story of the multiple ancestors we can claim relation to, and superiority over, since the very existence of visitors attests to humans’
extraordinary evolutionary survival. The video explains the lives of humans’ distant hominid ancestors in which “new species continuously evolved, and eventually went extinct.” Around 200,000 years ago, one species appeared, the members of which are “the ancestors of every human being alive today.” This tone implies a competitive, confrontational race to modernity that our ancestors alone won. The video also alerts visitors to the more dramatic plot twists of our ancestors’ story: “At one point, our species population was reduced to no more than 10,000 adults. We nearly became extinct.” From this low point, Homo sapiens’ survival is posited as triumphant self-determinism since “our ability to use our human traits to meet new challenges enabled us to survive. While earlier human species became extinct, modern humans continued to spread around the world.” As the “sole surviving human species,” visitors can revel in the singularity and exceptionalism assured by their genes, and take solace in the trail of fossils throughout the exhibition hall that provide “evidence of our epic worldwide journey.” This emphasizes the acceptance of homo sapiens’ united evolutionary success, embodied by the presence of visitors to legitimate the exhibit’s claims, giving unity priority over the discrepancies and differences that have characterized human experiences since then, and downplaying subsequent history since the species’ ascendance.

This allows the video’s narrator to serenely state that “differences” among humans (limited to “skin color and hair texture”) are only skin-deep; they “fall along a continuum, and do not separate modern humans into the categories some people call races.” On this point, Barthes’ biting invitation to ask “the parents of Emmett Till, the
young Negro assassinated by the Whites” and “the North African workers in the Goutte d’Or district in Paris what they think of the Great Family of Man” (Barthes 101–2) seems appropriate. Geological and statistical “truths” temper the subjective, subversive cultural differences that entwine agency, racial identity, scientific and epistemological values, and teleology for the human population over the entire course of history since Homo sapiens’ triumphant advent. While the video assures viewers that “[they] are part of this 6 million year story of adaptation and survival” because “the DNA of all modern humans is 99.9% identical,” its parting words—“we are all one species”—constitute essentially the same conceit as the “Great Family of Man” exhibition.

Genetics and evolutionary biology provide legitimating props for the exhibit’s claims of unity and equality, and are both reassuring and irrefutable in their impenetrability. Furthermore, the exhibit guarantees the mutual construction and inclusion between itself and its visitors through an appeal to the privileged codification of materiality in which most museums engage: that of aestheticization and acculturation according to structures of value that turn objects into artifacts and artifacts into “art.” In The Predicament of Culture, Clifford identifies “(scientific) cultural artifacts” and “(aesthetic) works of art” (222) as two collection categories typifying different qualities and worth. They form the top two axes of Clifford’s “machine for making authenticity” (224), and while “scientific,” age-authenticated artifacts are valued for their “traditional” and “collective” properties, “aesthetic” objects are qualified in terms of being “original” and “masterpieces.” As such, the display incorporates both the supposedly “objective” truth of science and benefits from the cultural capital of “art” by
presenting certain information as authentic evidence of human creativity and aesthetic awareness. The scientific authenticity of fossilized bones and tools mobilizes their ascendancy from science, to culture, and specifically to “art,” as original, singular, masterpiece evidence of human life.

The next example of how totalizing science is maneuvered into culture—or, as Barthes might say, how Nature is disguised as History and affect—best illustrates Clifford’s point about the shifting categories and value of objects in the museum sphere. Throughout the Hall of Human Origins’ advertising campaign (see, for example, figure 2) and front-and-center on its website, the collection of early human sculpture-reconstruction hybrids is touted as the exhibit’s crowning achievement. Rather than

Figure 2. Hall of Human Origins billboard. Personal photograph by author.
19 Mar. 2012
emphasizing the museum’s collection of fossilized specimens, artifacts, and reconstructed skeletons (many of which are casts, but that raises another set of issues regarding the differing requirements for “authenticity” between “art” and “science” categories), the exhibit’s designers privilege the contemporary creations of an individual artist, John Gurche. While Gurche’s training as an anthropologist who branched out into artistic representations and recreations of dinosaurs (extending even to *Jurassic Park*) and early hominid species grants him unique expertise in this field, his artifactual production ultimately seems most aligned with an artist creating formal portrait busts for his wealthy patron, the Smithsonian Institution (Gurche). This “inauthentic” inclusion raises questions about the validity of the exhibit’s immensely ambitious and totalizing claims about human experiences.

Inasmuch as Barthes argues that Nature is itself historical (Barthes 101), the display’s focus on scientific research and data in a public museum is also an example of certain cultural values and associations. What does it mean, then, if that foundational science is not based on “authentic” information, as is the case with the sculptural-masterpiece/techno-forensic busts? These reconstructions are arguably un-“scientific” and un-“real,” thereby troubling the display’s narrative of neutral empirical evidence accounting for the unity and equality of all human life. The fact that curators and visitors alike can never access the “truth” of pre-*homo sapiens* using empirical scientific evidence is passed over; denied, in fact, to ensure that the integrity of the exhibit and its guiding ideology (“we are all one species,” therefore our differences are inconsequential and not scientifically “real”) are preserved. To maintain this subterfuge, the exhibit
turns to the realm of artistic production to provide the unifying, reassuring power of visual and emotive “truth.”

The display of sculptures of early human heads takes a clear step away from the exhibit’s model of biological-geological authority and provides “proof” of the human family through hominid faces—each representing emotional, affective content in an aesthetic form—rather than static, lifeless rocks and bones displayed taxonomically. The heads are displayed on square mounts of varying heights, with each head placed at the height that its body would actually measure, enabling the viewer to stand in social, almost conversational relation to the eyes, mouth, and face. Consequently, the set of eight heads with animated eyes and reactive faces enacts a bizarre revised Snow White rendition with different facial expressions: *Homo neanderthalensis* looks slightly wary, tall *Homo erectus* gazes down aloofly, *Australopithecus afarensis* is open and inquisitive, *Homo Heidelbergensis* looks calm and content, and the visibly female *Homo floresiensis*, a much shorter hominid species, shoots a suspicious, defensive look upward (see figure 3). This component of the exhibit provides a materialization of the unified biological “family” in a way that ignores (and makes visitors more likely to forget) the impossibility of accounting for all human history dating back to prehistoric times, and that also reifies, into recognizable features, the claims of that impossible account and assurance.

The final curatorial strategy, in which impenetrable, objective facts are translated into subjective, cultural phenomena picks up directly from this idea. Visual timelines turn elusive dates (featuring too many zeroes to be comprehensible) and
events into tangible markers and evidence of human actionable achievement beyond uncontrollable evolutionism, providing a pseudo-indexical relationship between the

visitors’ reality and the scientific reconstruction of what happened millennia ago.

Consequently, occurrences of which most people do not have concrete knowledge—such as the comparative brain size and complexity of humans as opposed to other mammals, and the biological processes of plant and animal domestication—overlap with processes that seem very familiar, contemporary, and active to modern humans. Developments such as “gathering at the hearth,” estimated to have started by 800,000 years ago, “communicating with symbols” by 250,000 years ago, and “longer childhood

Figure 3. Sculptural reconstruction of *Homo floresiensis* head. Personal photograph by author. 19 Mar. 2012
and adolescence” by 160,000 years ago resonate with lived actions and experiences of most modern humans. Highlighting this continuity and similarity validates the exhibit’s other claims and implications regarding the universality of human experience, the inevitability of triumphant evolution and its troubling teleological rhetoric, and the avoidance of publicizing and analyzing the more problematic aspects of assuming that “one species” means political equality and unity.

The website’s “interactive timeline” feature (http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-evolution-timeline-interactive) also functions according to this strategy as it transforms scientific, datable, evolutionary “facts” and events into cultural phenomena. The inclusion of both epistemological categories on the same timeline functions both so that the cultural events documented alongside the scientific facts seem more empirically legitimate, and so that the scientific facts resonate affectively alongside cultural achievements. The color-keyed timeline displays changes and developments related to “Climate,” “Walking,” “Social life,” “Tools and Food,” “Bodies,” “Brains,” “Symbolism,” “Species/Geography,” and most majestically of all, “Humans Change the World” (Smithsonian Institution). Therefore, cultural phenomena are charted alongside biological developments, as well as extra-human factors, in an implied chronology of progress towards the majestic achievement of “Humans change the world.” Given this presentation of facts and phenomena in this timeline, it does not seem to be such a stretch that the same humans who accomplish the milestones under the category “Humans change the world” (color keyed in yellow) are also implicated in factors such as the “Climate” (represented in slate grey) in a reciprocal way. This timeline, featured
prominently on the exhibit’s website, exemplifies the exhibit’s strategies of using interactive technologies to interpellate its visitors into the ideology of the display, and of manipulating cultural events to emphasize the significance of its scientific, “natural,” totalizing claims.

Barthes asserts that the evidence for human unity, essence, and justice in the “Great Family of Man” exhibit lies in its reliance on “Nature,” its ignorance of “History,” and its privileging of the ambiguous aesthetic photographic medium. The Hall of Human Origins works toward this same aim—to show the universality of actions and experiences in all contemporary people’s lives, and throughout all time—in a differently problematic manner. While the exhibit is not explicitly grounded in cultural and aesthetic phenomena or artifacts, it attempts to create an emotionally united relationship between visitors and displays by transforming scientific, systematic events into cultural achievements and actions. Additionally, the exhibit’s use of interactive technologies and social media implicates its visitors in its unilateral claims, requiring their unified participation in order to transform exemplary, supportive visitors into further evidence of the progress and eminence of the human species. This universalizing strategy signifies the Museum of Natural History’s response to the problems raised by many cultural and museum scholars in the 1980s–90s (primarily James Clifford, Ivan Karp, and Steven Lavine, for my purposes here) regarding the ethics of including and representing certain groups in scientific and aesthetic displays.

The next chapter switches focus to the highly contested and theorized content and intentions of the National Museum of the American Indian, the newest museum in
the Smithsonian Institution. Its creation signifies a possible response and alternative to the fading practice in natural history museums to portray static versions of Native and indigenous peoples’ history in dioramas alongside their displays of “early” or “primitive” human ancestors. In Our Peoples, humanist, political, and Hollywood versions of Native American history are not only debunked, but their essentializing methods transmitted to visitors as stereotypes are identified and criticized. Unlike the Hall of Human Origins, Our Peoples does not privilege material artifacts with the sole power to objectively represent Native peoples’ diverse, affective, experiential stories, nor does age reify the truth value of those stories. Our Peoples recognizes that all humans are biologically almost identical, and concerns itself instead with the productive, problematic possibilities of encountering and representing these differences for the benefit of both its subjects and its visitors.
CHAPTER TWO
FIGURING HISTORIES AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE
AMERICAN INDIAN “OUR PEOPLES” EXHIBIT

Upon its celebrated opening, the NMAI’s founding director described the museum as “an international institution of living cultures,” not an “ethnographic museum”; a collaborative center which looks “toward the future in our desires to represent and interpret Native cultures and communities” and supports “their continuing generation of material culture and ideas and thinking and art” (West). In addition to this temporal emphasis on futurity and continuity, the museum also fundamentally operates through different representations, and representing differently. The NMAI’s oft-repeated ideal, functioning as reclamation, methodology, and model for the future, is that of “self-representation.” To determine what this practice entails, I take my lead from Gordon Brotherston’s expansive Book of the Fourth World, a study of overlooked Native American literatures read as circumstantial representations, and interpreted according to their internal linguistics, epistemologies, and structures. This analysis occurs “in terms suggested in the first and last instance by the testimony of Native Americans themselves, in a time and space their very texts imply and affirm” and questions the throwaway justification that Native Americans were not advanced enough to produce a literate, unified world by explaining that existing “native coherence [was] ceaselessly splintered by Western politics and philosophy” (Brotherston xi). Instead, native modes of representation “construct the world as it constructs itself, so that its self-definition or ontology corroborates political self-determination” (4). Emphasizing extant, adapted, enduring political identities necessitates a reconfiguration of
representation.

Self-representation, however, is not the same story told with a different accent, and is not found, static, in a single text. Rather, it has been “updated over the centuries” through the “adapting of imported texts to local priorities” (6). Therefore, self-representation has not been watered down by assimilation and acculturation over centuries, but rather reveals its “capacity for renovation from within” (6). Attempts at and examples of self-representation have “not in fact been generated by some severed Cartesian head, abstract and out of time” (348). Instead, the practice draws “its sap and humor from people very much alive in and to their environment.” The environment of museum curation and display is worth examining for its publicly oriented and self-aware form of representation.

Self-representation is multivocal, circumstantial, and operates within internal structures of value, knowledge, and authenticity. What do the voices of self-representation sound like, and how are they constructed? Jennifer Shannon argues that the NMAI’s identity is found in the “collaborative process and authored representations” which shows “the community curators’ faces and words on the walls, their knowledge and consent to be on display” and gives the museum its “legitimization as a Native museum” that “ethically presents Native voice” (218). Shannon suggests that communicating self-representation in a museum necessitates a sense of “subject-to-subject relations” directed through “embedded ethnographic text” which produces the “authority and authenticity of Native voice” and “the authentic subject” (231). Consequently, Shannon’s mechanism of self-representation reclaims the construct of
ethnographic authority—in which subjects and objects of another culture are ventriloquized through the ethnographer, rather than sharing a bilateral relationship—from the critiques of new museology.

The NMAI undoubtedly has been shaped by the critiques raised in the new museology that characterized “emerging trends in interpretive practices, including self-presentation and the concept of ‘decolonizing’ social institutions” (Brady, 140). Certain elements in the museum can be considered responses to these critiques, and examples of what new museological processes involve. Patricia Penn Hilden and Shari M. Huhndorf describe interactivity as “an integral part of the ‘new museology’” implemented purportedly to “transform a sorry history into practices meant to be less triumphal, more inclusive of those colonized by Europeans and their descendants in the Americas” (167). Interactivity appears to function both behind the scenes, characterizing the relationships developed throughout the research and production of the numerous community-curated exhibits, and beyond the walls, through the so-called fourth museum consisting mainly of Internet access to information, resources, and research.

Another response to the critiques of new museology is evident in the NMAI’s treatment of its object collections. The practices of “the anthropology that grew up in museums” created a temporally distanced, politically neutral “ethnographic present” by “irrevocably plac[ing] Indigenous objects in museums, where they were preserved and used to create images of the vanquished” (McMullen 69). Instead, NMAI exhibits and

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6 The first is the NMAI on the National Mall; the second is the George Gustav Heye Center in New York; the third is the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, MD (National Museum of the American Indian).
performances demonstrate that objects are taken care of as active, useable pieces of lived (and living) experiences. They are not statically preserved because their durability or materiality is of the utmost importance, but rather because they continue to affect living peoples’ actions, traditions, and memories of the past. The NMAI’s conception of how objects should be portrayed and valued is evident in its creation of communal, educational, performance spaces that make the museum “more of a living gathering place than a repository for cultural property” (Cobb 492). The NMAI also implements different standards for object-care “based on the belief that many cultural objects are alive rather than inanimate” (494). These include allowing artifacts “to ‘breathe’ rather than suffocate in sealed plastic containers, to move or store objects so that they are facing a particular direction, and to provide tribal citizens with the ability to visit their objects and to ‘feed’ them, often with pollen, or perform ceremonies with them” (494). Therefore, objects in the NMAI break free of dominant Western shackles of value that are based on the normalized understandings of aesthetics, expensive materials, durability, and age. Instead, “objects are imbued with their meaning by the community and context in which they are used” (499), which are revealed through the cultural interpreters’ guided tours, presentations, and performances.

The NMAI’s response to the critiques of new museology is not only measurable through its output of interactive inclusion and meaningful object encounters. It is also visible in the self-conscious display of its input—the choices and ideas behind the construction of the exhibits themselves. Indeed, Amanda Cobb claims that the NMAI’s new museological strategies respond to the crises of ethnographically representing
cultural others by “actually incorporating criticism of museums into exhibitions” (488). This gesture necessarily takes on a postmodernist self-evaluation that “throws the authority of museums into question” and subtracts some of their power (488). However, while this unexpected metacognition might destabilize the authority of the museum institution, some scholars argue that it does not affect the hegemonic nationalism under which these museums operate. In fact, the new concern about representations strengthens the museum’s role as an instrument of a monolithic nation-state solidifying the latter’s own exceptionalism because American museums, and the objects they sanctify, are “critical in upholding certain ideas of the nation, for they are one tool by which a community from divergent backgrounds is able to ‘imagine’ a shared past and future, to borrow from Benedict Anderson” (Ackley 264). Rather than representing long-deserved equality and respect, the NMAI’s close proximity to the Capitol may signal that it “unresistantly has become absorbed, colonized if you will, in a nation-making process” (Brady 130). More specifically, the NMAI gives in to the political oppression and cultural streamlining of American history when it “fails to serve as a site of truth telling and remembering” (Lonetree 323). In this light, the NMAI is another institution of the American state, rather than a continental and international Native center.

Even the NMAI’s commendable strategy of self-aware, multivalent representation is not above this criticism, since it has been seen as “self-representation without consideration of the ways in which working within such a venue might frame American Indian issues or delimit the potential for deep critical engagement with past
and continuing government policy” (Brady 137). The critical relationship between Indigenous Americans and politically-recognized (US citizen) Americans, which has often fractured self-representation, is limited by the NMAI’s political alliances. Brady argues that it is geographically, foundationally, and ideologically too close to the governing body from which it should maintain critically distant, if not outwardly criticize. Its presence on the National Mall prevents active resistance and generative representation against normative U.S. nationalism. Indeed, Brady mounts her critique not just against the NMAI’s weaknesses, or the Smithsonian’s privileged yet imprisoning venue of the National Mall, but also against the perceived power of museums in general to provide educational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and social benefits to their constituents. These duties influence the NMAI’s approaches to teaching visitors about Native Americans’ lives, its outreach to Native American communities, and its conscious transparency in showing the “museumifying” process. Nevertheless, while “the self-reflexive nature of the museum does question educational institutions as static transmitters of information to emphasize communication as a dialogic process,” Brady implies that the attention the NMAI pays to itself “naturalizes the importance of the museum complex and nation building in general in lieu of programs that more directly benefit American Indian people” (148).

Building a national museum to display and advance Native American cultures and education implies that the only way these cultures can be legitimate is if they have been validated (i.e., collected, preserved, and displayed) by a museum. The museum-building process, within the oversight of the US government, constitutes the official,
sanctioned way in which Native American cultures must be prepared in order to be safely exhibited, taught, and proliferated. While the institution represents for many “an unprecedented expression of cultural sovereignty,” and should be celebrated as such, it perpetuates several problematic aspects, “including its role in reproducing national identity, the fund-driven majority museum, and the collection of Native culture for a largely non-Native audience” (Brady 134). Nevertheless, I argue that the NMAI is an exercise in particular cultural sovereignty by and for American Indians in its subject and content, and that it also enacts a form of cultural sovereignty against dominant museum practices and master narratives of immutable history in its displays.

However, the self-reflexive displays that signal the destabilization and deconstruction of authorized history can be seen as a problematic, inauthentic strategy for a museum meant to center on Indigenous epistemologies and representations. Associating this uniquely Native American project with the prevalent critiques of postmodernism seems to once again subjugate Indigenous histories and experience under a Western model of analysis and judgment. Indeed, Amy Lonetree argues that conflating an “indigenous understanding of history with a postmodernist presentation of history” allows the inaccessibility of the past to neutralize “the hard truths of colonization and the genocidal acts that have been committed against Indigenous people” (322). But the objective of the museum is precisely not to provide an “an alternative, but still equally triumphal, master narrative of the nation’s past” (Hilden and Huhndorf 162) in which Native Americans’ agonies and victories alike are singularly exalted. In fact, constructing an indigenous understanding of history as an “an
essentialist, ‘spiritualist’ alternative to contemporary crises of personal identity, family life, and environmental degradation” without taking into account any postmodernist critiques and strategies risks “reinforc[ing] a newer but still potentially treacherous master narrative” (McMullen 82). It would ultimately place Native American voices atop, but still within, an oppressive and unproductive binary.

Amanda Cobb demonstrates a much more conciliatory stance between the NMAI’s exhibits and alternate modes of postmodernity; one which I embrace and expand upon. The museum’s goal is not to write a story against the dominant middle-school-history-class narrative of Native peoples, because to do so would acknowledge the importance and continued power and presence of that structure. As such, “the community-curated installations do not offer the revisionist, ‘this is the story you were told’ this is our version of the story’ lessons many visitors might expect” (Cobb 496). In fact, the NMAI’s particularity and self-affirmed difference lies not just in the materials of its exhibits, or its personal perspectives, but (perhaps most crucially) in the way this perspective is structured and communicated. Cobb emphasizes that “the installations do not offer narratives with clear beginnings, middles, and ends at all” (496), and because this form is implicitly tied up with a certain content the museum can work toward rectifying part of Native American dual oppression of physical, psychic, collective trauma, and the tendency of white Western histories to erase or ignore that trauma rather than witness to it.

The NMAI’s work may not reflect the most informational, entertaining, aesthetic, technological, or linear exhibits. Instead, the NMAI is “among the most
heavily and self-consciously theorized museums in existence” in its architecture, proscription (or lack thereof) of visitors’ movements, and object installations and their corresponding metadata, which are based on a “combination of Native worldviews and postmodernity” (Cobb 503). Ironically, this plurality is what marks the singularity of the museum and its project, which leads “away from the more standard and much more familiar forms of display and organization and toward a dialogic system that demands the critical engagement and interpretation of its visitors” (503). While Cobb fends off criticism against both the “theory and scholarship at work in the NMAI” and “the symbolic importance of the entire project” (503), articulating the latter point seems naïve at best and debasing to the NMAI’s work at worst. Relying on the museum’s “symbolism” to educate people, attract visitors, and support Native groups and projects seems to belittle of its non-symbolic (i.e., material or “real”) goals, and casts it “crudely as part of an apparatus of cultural and political hegemony” (Conn 3). Invoking this “symbolism” changes the museum’s feasible intentions and the visitors’ expectations, reducing the multiplicity of experiences and responses to a “demand for political penance from museums for the sins of colonialism and capitalism and redress for the complaints that arise out of identity politics” (Conn 15).

Conn’s scathing critique of the “heritage industry,” and the machines—such as museums—that produce it, submerges the sustainability of symbolism alongside the NMAI’s cultural, legislative, and educational goals. “Heritage” seems to be a muddled symbol of the past which recasts a certain perspective of history “as something always warm and fuzzy, something to be celebrated, and most of all something never to be
questioned or challenged by anyone outside the group whose culture we are celebrating” (Conn 39). “Heritage,” unlike “history,” does not have to be rationalized, educational, or communicable among diverse people, and does not need to explain itself since it functions “symbolically” rather than effectually. While some visitors and critics can trust in the museum’s symbolic presence and power, its most important contribution is its destabilization of “history,” not its subscription to “heritage.” The “history” on display in Our Peoples is not an angry attack, a blithe revision, or an ignorant celebration; rather, it is an epistemologically-aware directive for visitors to grasp throughout the exhibits, and beyond the NMAI’s walls. Ultimately, I provide the same answer to Conn’s titular question *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* as the author does— “yes”—but with regards to the NMAI, I assert that museums need objects like the text in Our Peoples not “still,” with its temporal bind to the past, but from now on, and into the future.

I argue that the most powerful artifact on display in the Our Peoples gallery is not part of the eight community-specific displays or the backbone historical narrative that presents the forces of disease, guns, Christianity, and treaties and legislation in the Americas. In fact, it is arguably not a material object at all. Instead, the element that most convincingly displays a unique practice of self-representation and theorizes a mode of existence beyond ethnographic stereotypes, teleological control, and the authority of established cultural collections (both narratives and objects) is a text and its aural narration. I refer to a placard on the wall by a display of seventeen portraits of American Indians by George Catlin which face the imposing painting of George Heye,
the foundational collector of the NMAI’s holdings. While these paintings are some of the most traditionally aesthetic and valuable objects on display in this exhibit—as they are a classic example of American Indians being represented by the white Euro-American according to outsiders’ values and desires—the text accompanying them upturns this form of representation. While the visitor gazes at the wall of twenty frames, three of them come to life as television screens which display a living portrait: that of American Indian actor Floyd Favel narrating the placard’s text (see figure 4). The visitor, formerly the assured, sole consumer of passive visual objects, is instead locked

Figure 4. Floyd Favel narrating the Catlin gallery in Our Peoples. Personal photograph by author. 19 Mar. 2012.
into Favel’s narrative. This disrupts the conventional comprehension and consumption of centuries-old portraiture, as well as Catlin’s representation of history, and instead draws attention to the constructed nature of that history and the ambiguity of the values it entails.

This specific portrait display, the whole Our Peoples exhibit, and indeed the larger cultural, intellectual, and political project of the NMAI strive to reveal the ways in which history and the past—“two different things”—are manipulated to be the same, awarded or denied authenticity and authority, and divided or conflated (Smith and Rosen, “Our Peoples”). This is a self-reflective move on the level of this exhibit’s narrative, which is about “how eight communities understand their historical identities,” but it also reflects the bigger self-fashioning, self-representing agenda of the NMAI, and what museum institutions should always be striving toward to alleviate the problems of attempting objective representations and to encourage political inclusiveness and multiplicity through different display practices. This text breaks both the immersive narrative diegesis of nineteenth century artists in the West, and the authoritative temple-textbook aura of a museum, and writes back on the very “authority” that allows most museums to operate: the assumption that there is one dominant history valued enough to be preserved.

The text, composed by Paul Chaat Smith and Herbert R. Rosen in their capacities as associate curators for the exhibit, declares that “this”—the Catlin portraits in the galleries of American Indian self-representation, the surrounding displays wrangled by “community curators,” the difference between this museum and others on
the same strip of national lawn—“is about history and about the past—two different things.” The goal of the exhibit, and of the representation choices governing the NMAI, is to examine “the alchemy that changes the past into stories—the histories we tell about it.” The transformation is thus evoked as something mystical, illogical, and practically medieval, since “alchemy” refers primarily to the proto-scientific practice and belief in the supernatural and immaterial transformation of metals into gold. The curators describe the process of turning events, traditions, and lived experiences into quantifiable dates, academic disciplines, and vehicles for political power as a mystical form of experimentation that relies on irrationality to obfuscate the truth. The use of the alchemy metaphor thus underlines two elements of “history” which the NMAI resists: the first is its arbitrariness, and the second is its (often deliberate) confusion of what is or can be true and authentic to the disadvantage of non-dominant parties.

Smith and Rosen continue with their explanation that while the “past”—the births, deaths, and events that happened on certain recorded days—never changes, “the way we understand it, learn about it, and know about it changes all the time.” In other words, a thinking public in general, but especially the people who take on the task of understanding the past, teaching it to others, and representing it in public and visual places such as museums, need to actively account for “history” constantly changing, and for the way in which the study of history can change what that history means. “Yesterday’s truth,” they go on to say, “becomes false or ill-informed or offensive today,” while what was once considered offensive or impolite can now be regarded as a truth. History can therefore never be just a “truth,” for there is no such authority that is
universal for different people and perspectives, or across times and places. While this could be a potentially paralyzing thought, and possibly the undoing of museums which use their institutional clout to support a certain perspective of history, this text suggests that recognizing the difference between what is formalized into History and what can broadly be conceived of as “the past” or “what actually happened” is imperative not just for museum-goers but also for museum creators.

The writers then enact this assertion by describing three elements of formal history about Native Americans that have “been turned upside down,” with both positive and negative implications for American Indians, but which must be openly admitted and entwined with contemporary thought and action. They state that ruptures in the “long accepted histories about the sophistication of the cultures in the Americas before 1492, the size of the Native population, and the role disease played in decimating the population” have changed the way people think about American Indians. The ambiguity in these three issues—the high sophistication or lack thereof; the large, powerful population dwindling over centuries, or the persistent presence of Native populations currently; the pivotal, causal role of disease in decimating the population, or the use of biology to scapegoat human greed and malice?—serves as the perfect example of how dangerous complete trust in official History is.

The possibility of turning upside down ideas “about the sophistication of the cultures in the Americas before 1492” implies a disavowal of the constant referral to and reliance on the glory of pre-Colombian cultures as the high point and saving grace of all indigenous Americans. The derogatory belief that Europeans did not destroy the
Americas because there was nothing and no one advanced enough to be a threat on the continents is obviously an idea that needs to be aggressively turned upside down. However, the response to that—the glorification of those people and cultures—is not uncritically accepted at the NMAI, despite its implied superiority of indigenous peoples. Rather, this need to with exalting this particular past and paying homage to it could be interpreted as a way to deny the subsequent problems in the five centuries since that heyday, and to avoid any mention of the present. The long-accepted history of American Indian sophistication that needs to be analyzed and perhaps overturned is the way in which Aztec, Incan, and Mayan wealth and supremacy has been accepted, lauded, and extravagantly displayed as a pacifying or reparatory gesture. This representation of history is safely displayed because so much of it no longer exists and has been effectively neutralized by a healthy dose of time, and thus avoids dealing with continuing reality, ongoing actions for sovereignty, and the modern methods employed to use, not just preserve, traditions.

Smith and Rosen’s next point, about how “the size of the Native population” is not a stable fact but can be manipulated into “history” and then turned upside down illuminates the ambiguous and potentially misleading quality of even quantitative information. The immediate problem with conjecture on the population of indigenous peoples living in the Americas is that there simply are no accurate records of these numbers before European invasion, nor were any lists of the dead subsequently composed. The attempts at providing a number in the millions for the native population do not provide the comfort of specificity, since no records or archives exist. The
estimates that do exist are insufficient on the one hand because there are no signifiers of sufficient magnitude, affect, and gravity to refer to the decimation of two continents’ populations, and on the other (paradoxical) hand, because the obscene millions in those estimates cease to be tragic, to paraphrase Stalin, and become stultifying statistics.

The “long accepted histories” about the native population numbers, and their upheavals, refer not just to demographic accuracy hundreds of years ago; they have contemporary consequences for living populations. The magnitude of these numbers, while intended to evoke shock and respect for the dead, can also belittle or set aside the people who “survived.” Bluntly put, the reiterated millions who died in the past can cast a shadow of disavowal for the people who live in the present and claim Native American heritage, identity, and sovereignty. The official history of how many people died directly affects how contemporary populations of American Indians are conceptualized, since so-called “revivals” in Native American culture, events, and education can either be interpreted as positive reclaims of identity and subjectivity, or as negative examples of exploitation for the perks of tribal scholarships, healthcare, casinos, and other benefits. Once again, in a few words, Smith and Rosen illuminate how a singular perspective of what history tells us always contains multiplicities, and consequences for the present lived reality. Their model for how a cultural institution can embrace this destabilizing force is evident in the duality of how turning the “long accepted history” of Native population sizes upside down is both supportive and exploitative.
The third seemingly incontrovertible historical “fact” that the curators invoke in this paragraph is the “the role disease played in decimating the population,” which, despite constituting a biological “event,” can be turned upside down, reinterpreted, and continuingly consequential for contemporary Americans. The explanation that diseases endemic to Europe were responsible for the vast sweep of swift death in the Americas implies that forces of microbiology beyond human agency and personal motivation were the main culprits for the decimated native population. While this may empirically be part of “history,” the way this factor has been fervently upheld above all others suggests it functions as a powerful denial of Europe’s other—calculated, political, greedy—reasons and actions in invading the Americas. If the “history” that disease played the biggest role in decimating the native population is contested or turned upside down, however, the implications of the Europeans triumphing over the indigenous peoples despite their unbalanced numbers can suggest a perceived “natural,” genetic difference and hierarchy between Europeans and American Indians. In other words, if biology is not the reason for the indigenous Americans’ weakness, then there must be some underlying human essence or nature to blame, either on the part of the Native Americans or of the Europeans, whose culpability seems more actionable and accountable. The role of disease is therefore not an incontrovertible biological truth of the past, but an aspect of History that must be interrogated as another social construct of domination, deferral, and disenfranchisement.

The curators’ text enumerates some of the stereotypes of American Indian identity that result from the past being disciplined into History, such as the “saviors of
the environments,” “barbarians,” and “noble savages.” The way in which such descriptors can be complacently perceived as justified or even positive is what the NMAI tackles through its attention to the multiplicity of pasts that have been steamrollered into one history by relying on these shorthand unifying identities. The designation of indigenous American groups as “saviors of the environment” puts unfair pressure on American Indians to provide this enormous service while also disavowing the culpability of American industrialism and consumerism in destroying natural resources and landscapes. Furthermore, the association of American Indians with nature, the land, and the environment seems to denote that they are aligned more closely with wildlife populating the natural world than with cogent and complete humans. The negativity of American Indians being closer to the land and more attuned to nature does not stem from its impossibility or inherent falseness, but rather from the implication that indigenous people are akin to the flora and fauna of the land, and thus property for invaders to do with as they will.

The other two stereotypes evoked in the text—those of American Indians being “barbarians” and “noble savages”—are both connected to the powerfully political, aesthetic, and scientific concept of primitivism. The barbarian identity provided easy justification for European military and cultural domination, as on the one hand the threat of barbarian violence had to be eradicated, while simultaneously Europeans’ benevolent superior civilization had to be exerted over the barbarians’ primitiveness in order to prevent that violence. Native peoples’ “noble” primitiveness was also pseudo-positively used as a way for colonial Americans to represent the ideals of their New
World in contrast to the extreme decadence of Europe and its effete pageantry. Similarly, the nobility and innocence associated with indigenous primitiveness symbolized the ancient Edenic existence of pure, childlike people from whom Europeans evolved. The savage was “noble,” and thus should be respected, but only as supporting evidence of how far Euro-Americans had progressed.

The curators’ text draws attention to how simultaneous and conflicting conceptions of Native Americans as devils, wildlife, innocent, barbaric, and belonging to nature but not possessing land are paradoxically part of history, thus inherently destabilizing its singularity and supremacy. All of these identities rely on turning an individual past into a stereotypical, uniform history, which disallows American Indians to be seen as “human beings.” Even the most humanitarian, sympathetic representation of native peoples as “victims” of the past, of European forces, and of their own mismanagement is historically tilted, rather than being actively or contemporarily oriented. A person’s being characterized as a “victim” implies that a past, unjust event is the originary, constitutional, and formative part of a life. Emphasizing the victim status of indigenous Americans constantly casts them as people whose actions and identity are based only on those of their oppressors, and on past events, denying future and even present presence and sovereignty for American Indians.

As Smith and Rosen point out, official history has produced “a dizzying spectrum of impressions deeply imbedded, fiercely held, hard to dislodge” about American Indians, and subjective, artistic representations are perhaps more pervasive than academic history. While history generally treats Native Americans as people of the
distant past, art, film, and literature pervades the present with its more popular, public use of indigenous peoples. The text points to how “Hollywood has offered its own image of us—a powerful one forged and reinforced by movies seen by countless viewers,” which is more persistent than many more official accounts. Since filmic representations are generally more fictional than those of archival, academic history, the Hollywood stereotypes doubly disenfranchise their subjects since they are largely inaccurate but more widely seen, and since they falsify real lives and experiences into fictive generalities. Nevertheless, the writers’ rhetoric of the power of films to reach “countless viewers” also suggests that there is hope for filmic representations to provide more ethical, just images of Native Americans, spurred along by the demands of a more aware public.

The curators next bring the visitors’ attention directly back to their current surroundings: portraits of Native Americans and paintings of daily native life by George Catlin, acknowledged as a “richly talented artist who brought his easel west in the early 19th century.” The text explains that “Catlin not only drew” American Indians, but that by aesthetically and economically profiting from them, “he declared himself an authority on his subjects.” During the nineteenth century’s expansion and exploration, and simultaneous isolation and slow communication, Catlin’s paintings of American Indian people and life were “profoundly influential” not only because of their formal merit and aesthetic value, but because of what the idea of painting portraits meant. Portraiture remains a revered form of representation since it necessitates the wealth of the subject to commission it, and the status of that subject to be worthy of a painter’s
skill. However, it also seems to be a strategy for destabilizing temporality and avoiding a present reality. Portraits are markers of presence, reality, accuracy—a moment frozen in time and faithfully rendered. They provide a permanent “present” by removing the subject from that presence and placing it entirely in the believable, recognizable realm of artistic atemporality. The curators’ text thus draws attention to the ways in which Catlin’s portraits seem to avoid confronting the presence of American Indians. Instead, they alleviate the past wounds inflicted by white Euro-Americans by showing that American Indians are worthy of high artistic representation and recognition, and ensure a preserved future for the immobile and detached subjects of the portraits.

Representing native peoples through painting is a subjective endeavor by virtue of artists’ aesthetics, the arbitrary worth of art accruing value over time, and the importance (of portraiture in particular) of its perceived lifelikeness. Photography, however, would seem to be a less problematic mode of visual representation since issues of accuracy and realness are generally not at stake. Indeed, Smith and Rosen describe the camera to be “documentary” in depicting American Indians, since it “captured the faces, dress, and lives of many Indians” arguably more precisely than Catlin’s limited paintings. The most appropriate word for freeze-framing a life and providing evidence for native peoples’ existence by camera is, ironically, “captured,” with all the connotations of seizing, stealing, taking wrongfully, gaining control over, and confining. While this also encompasses the vaguely pop-cultural belief that Native Americans fear(ed) cameras because they are thought to steal their subjects’ souls, the text states that the problem with photographic, documentary images of indigenous
people is the intention behind it. Outsiders accosting indigenous communities with cameras and displaying the resulting images “fed a hunger to know about these peoples.” This mode of representation is one of oppression, since it objectified Native Americans and made them objects of consumption for the viewing public. It supported mainstream American desires to devour and incorporate visions of perceived enemies, showing all the details of personal, everyday life so as to denude any privacy and thus defuse any threat. Images of others captured by cameras existed for the viewing public to consume; literally, as evidence of its cultural superiority, and figuratively, to disarm the photographic objects of their subjectivity and power.

The text describes photographs as an example of the way in which official history and perceived impressions of American Indians rely on props that are not created by Native Americans themselves. Smith and Rosen add that “museums, in their collections, exhibits, and displays, have been significant in defining who we are,” implying that material collections in authoritative institutions have played a role in representing Native Americans without any input from those groups themselves. The curators also draw attention to the NMAI’s own project of becoming a site of community engagement, tribal outreach and inclusion, and public education in the hands of American Indian community curators and educators. In other words, the NMAI would still be a museum that is “significant in defining who we are,” but its methods and motivations in doing so would be more determined by Native American current practices in contemporary self-governing groups, rather than by the museum practices focusing on object preservation and distanced ethnographic representation.
The writers and curators passionately reiterate the role museums have played in defining Native American identity, calling them “persistent streams of information that have shaped impressions of Native People,” and while they are often disparate, “most of the sources share this: they were NOT created by Native Americans—not the paintings, not the photos, not the movies, not the exhibits and collections, and, especially, not the histories.” Smith and Rosen thus draw attention to the double oppression inherent in American Indian self-representation: The first loss occurred in the actual battles and diseases that killed millions of people, and the subsequent political and socio-cultural imperialism and assimilation crusades, while the second is the lack, or downright prohibition, of testimony and self-representation of that loss. The fact that the paintings, photos, some objects, and the overall histories and ideologies regarding Native American identity that have been reinforced over decades were not created by indigenous people attests to how Native American carriers of culture and lore were killed, cultural objects and artifacts were similarly lost or destroyed, and contemporary cultural channels are ignored, under-funded, or disavowed for their inauthenticity.

Despite this painfully repeated cycle of physical and discursive disenfranchisement, Smith and Rosen’s call for reflexive attention to how history continues to universalize and oppress some of its objects does not deny the more positive side of what museum collections can represent. In fact, the multiplicity of their curation model acknowledges that some of the efforts of representing indigenous American life and culture may be “well intentioned,” and that “without them, much that is preserved would have disappeared.” This is true, but the privilege of being
“preserved” by an external institution is not the high point of Native American cultural history, nor does this collection portray a definitive representation of history. Consequently, “there’s another truth: the subjects here—us—have been portrayed from the outside, our stories told by others to explain or justify their own agendas.” The representations attempted by “the outside” for American Indian groups are therefore essentially incompatible with identity and reality, since identity comes from interior understanding and current use of the culture that builds identity.

While the NMAI confronts the external agendas (either directly antagonistic or apologetic and revisionist) which aim to put Native Americans (or the history of Native Americans, who are always already people of the past) on display, the curators are also concerned with the simultaneous simplification and repression of being “considered a people without a history.” Despite the criticism against hegemonic history constructed from past experiences and events in the lives of Native Americans, being labeled a people without history of any kind is equally oppressive. To be a group without a history suggests that the group’s participants have not developed to the point of participating in subjective, political human history, and the best they can contribute is objective, biological demographic data to be catalogued alongside wildlife and climate. Being “without a history” also implies a carelessness and lack of stewardship and pride towards one’s own cultural practices and experiences, and casts the blame toward the Native American groups for not wanting, or being able, to retain their own history and preserve it for their descendants and for the general public.
The NMAI attempts therefore to clarify a truth that has disintegrated throughout the dominance of white American history: “the truth is we care passionately and have fought at great cost to reclaim knowledge of the past.” That popular stereotypes of Native American life still persist is a testament to the combined power of academic indoctrination, Hollywood representations, and the low cultural stakes in attempting authentic, contemporary representations of lived native traditions and experiences. Thus, Smith and Rosen must confront the paradox that “for all our visibility we have been rendered invisible and silent,” and encourage a mode of self-representation for “a history-loving people stripped of their own history.” The text illustrates the way in which visibility does not make for democratic and just representation, and indeed the cultural visibility of American Indians is not associated with their power and privilege, but rather with the power of groups looking on American Indians from the outside to construct false subjectivity.

In discussing this invisible “visibility” the text also obliquely references its own capacity as an object in a museum to be visible and on display, and thus gestures toward both the power and pitfalls of museum display. While American Indians have often been incorporated into museum exhibits displaying historical, cultural, and biological encounters in the Americas, this inclusion does not automatically mean that native peoples consider these exhibits to be worthy uses of their past. Being visible in a museum does not mean equitable, subjective, inclusive, authentic representation. The curators, subjects, and visitors of the NMAI must therefore be vigilant against the temptation to write off real political struggle by assuming that the array of problems in
Native American groups are all being represented because some groups are included in an institutionalized museum to (arguably) call their own. Therefore, part of the model of self-representation that the NMAI espouses through its community curation is that self-representation cannot presume to speak for others. Instead, this representation must be limited, and recognize its own limits, for all the people and groups that cannot physically, ideologically, or culturally be included together.

Consequently, Smith and Rosen restate the foundation of the museum’s narratives and ideologies on “consultation, collaboration, and co-operation with natives.” This strategy, the text maintains, allows the NMAI to “share the power museums usually keep” for themselves, or distribute scantily among privileged donors and visitors. In establishing the potential of museums to share this power, the NMAI sets itself alongside the other great national collections and institutions that are perhaps more famous or more visited, thus legitimating itself in the sphere of museal discourse and power. However, it also sets itself apart from other museums with its own particular practice of gathering its representative power from different indigenous groups, and then sharing it among others. With this statement, Smith and Rosen gesture both beyond the objects in the specific Our Peoples exhibit and the walls of the NMAI, and incite other museums and museum-goers to self-reflectively consider the way in which exhibits can display power, and perhaps redistribute it among its subjects and objects more evenly.

The NMAI ranks itself among other museums that have long had the power to make history, but differentiates itself by openly stating it is creating a history, rather
than plucking it ready-formed and fully authenticated from some bank of past human phenomena. Indeed, Smith and Rosen proudly acknowledge that the NMAI, and Our Peoples in particular, is productive and successful in making history, and “like all other makers of history, it has a point of view, an agenda.” This point of view is obviously oriented specifically toward American Indian experiences of the past, modes of shaping and claiming identity, and political sovereignty of self-representation. But another part of this agenda more generally involves museums’ role in forming identities, inspiring cultural pride and practice, and educating its visitors uniquely. Part of the agenda is to make people more aware of agendas everywhere—especially in supposedly objective, universal, authority-imbued institutions.

What’s found in Our Peoples, the curators unequivocally state, is “our way of looking at the Native American experience.” The result of the “consultation, collaboration, and cooperation” is not supposed to be an ambiguously authored, all-inclusive representation of authoritative truths; rather, it is very carefully and proudly branded as the work of specific tribal communities and native peoples. Therefore, Smith and Rosen acknowledge that “what is said—and what you see—may fly in the face of much you’ve learned.” This does not necessarily make it truer, but it does make clearer the fact that every form of representation, and perhaps visual, object-based representation most problematically, provides only one perspective, and as such should be interpreted contextually rather than singularly. This exhibit in particular thus offers “self-told histories of selected Native communities. Other communities, other perspectives would have produced different results.” While Smith and Rosen again
draw attention to the arbitrary and constructed nature of producing narratives of history and knowledge about that history, they do not assert that this constructedness means that the experiences exhibited in Our Peoples are artificial, non-authentic, or not real. Rather, in claiming that this perspective is one of many, they encourage the NMAI’s model of self-representation by implicitly acknowledging other possible representations that are valid, subjective, and experiential, but which cannot all be exhibited in one finite space.

Through the NMAI, Native American community curators express their belief that their ”survival, the original people of this hemisphere, is one of the most extraordinary stories in human history,” and thus is worth telling. The objects in the exhibit, along with their cultural owners’ understanding, experience, and respect for their uses, become the evidence to support this belief. However, even the inside, “authentic” information given by the curators and contributors and the seemingly material neutrality of the objects on display are entirely contextual and biased, and the text alerts visitors that “here we have done as others have done—turned events into history.” Smith and Rosen are simultaneously hugely inclusive in their explanation of the NMAI’s purpose, which is to do what all other museums have done, while also representing the NMAI’s exclusively self-aware stance by openly stating this strategy for themselves and implicating all other museums in it.

The text ends with the invitation/warning to “view what’s offered with respect, but also skepticism. Explore this gallery. Encounter it. Reflect on it. Argue with it.” This invocation emphasizes both the exceptionalism of the NMAI in particular for
acknowledging and using the arbitrariness of history to augment the strength of its community-based narratives and model of self-representation, and the applicability of this approach to other modes and experiences of cultural representation. Smith and Rosen thus reveal the duality of exceptionalism and anti-exceptionalism at work in the NMAI’s exhibits, which places American Indians’ identities, cultural objects, and museal representations in the same sphere as other cultural groups who are visually displayed in national museums, but which also constructs unique and extraordinary narratives of self-determining identities which arguably cannot be found in other museums.

The curators’ invocation of “Encounter it. Reflect on it. Argue with it” requires that visitors not assume the unequivocal truth of any transformation of the past into history. Instead, they must engage with, question, and critique what they see—even if what they see seems to be a (pre)dominant interpretation. This implies that the curators expect potential problems with their construction of history and identity in Our Peoples, including how to engage with visitors who believe what they see is simply a “Native American thing” not accessible to all, and perhaps even worse, how to react to visitors identifying as American Indian who assert that their history should remain an “Native American thing” and thus not understandable or visible to outsiders. Interestingly, Smith and Rosen’s instructions in the text seem to license visitors to criticize the representation of groups who have experienced extreme loss and tragedy. While the viability of criticism varies between the Museum of Natural History, the NMAI, and the Holocaust Museum, for example, the text encourages visitors to think beyond the
stereotypical victim status of American Indians. Ultimately, the exhibit functions as a networked collage of continuing contemporary life and culture, rather than a memorial to people considered never to have truly lived.

In contrast to the Hall of Human Origins, Our Peoples in the NMAI strives to acknowledge and alert visitors to the distance and difference between the experience of past events and the objective history told about them. The exhibit displays the self-selected and self-curated narratives of particular groups of Native Americans, thereby representing these groups’ interests, but negotiates the balance between blind devotion to a singular constituency and a more inclusive but critical stance toward its subjects and visitors. Museal innovation in the Our Peoples exhibit does not take the form of increasing attention and provision of technologies for visitor amusement, but instead is found in the forthright critique of museum authority in which the NMAI itself also engages. The text analyzed throughout this chapter is both a product of, and a critique of the authority that allows museums to operate, and of the authority that visitors endow to institutions such as museums. It alerts visitors to different productions of history, and hence different constructions of identity, and to the possibilities of displaying self-represented identities, community-curated narratives, and transparent display constructions. The NMAI thus draws attention to the uniqueness of its own display practices, while also calling upon its visitors to challenge the other displays they encounter with its models.
CONCLUDING REMARKS AND A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In the first chapter, I analyzed the Hall of Human Origins in dialogue with Roland Barthes’ critique of the “Great Family of Man” photography exhibition to emphasize how the Hall’s purported objective information and universal inclusion result from its creation of an ideal, uniform audience out of its visitors, from its extensive use of interactive and social media both within and outside the museum walls, and from its complex intertwining of biological fact and cultural phenomena in its displays. Ultimately, I find that the Hall of Human Origins represents humans’ particularity and cultural groups in terms of a time-authenticated “universal aesthetics,” which is “far easier to appeal to the public” (Karp and Lavine 380) than striving to represent continuing specificity, difference, and subsequent inequality.

Conversely, in Chapter Two I suggested that the NMAI does not conform to the Hall’s conception of progressive (both chronological and ameliorating) time, which implies that because we all started in one place—descended from the same biological ancestors—we have all come to the same, mutually beneficial, equal, and unproblematic place. Instead, Our Peoples treats authenticated, accepted history, and its resulting temporal neutrality, skeptically because of how the discipline has (mis)represented Native Peoples throughout academia, pop culture, and public stereotypes. The exhibit’s metanarrative on the creation of history and the construction of exhibits about it encourages visitors to question not just the history they know about Native Americans, but the histories they encounter in other media, the histories they tell themselves, and the information they gain from other museum institutions in general.
While the Hall of Human Origins strives toward the familiarization and aestheticization of its objects, and inclusion of its subjects, Our Peoples allows for critical distance and potential alienation in its displays, trusting that visitors can learn meaningful stories from its objects without having to hug them, which Michael O’Sullivan’s *Washington Post* review suggests is a strength of the Hall of Human Origins. Similarly, Our Peoples does not focus on explaining the materiality and justifying the worth of individual objects, but instead provides (and demands) multiple interpretations, connections, and memories for its artifacts. As NMAI curator Jolene Rickard suggests, the exhibit is about the histories represented by an “assemblage” (qtd. in Jonaitis and Berlo 225), which decentralizes the power of museum and academic institutions to perpetuate singular stories about diverse groups.

The funding behind these exhibits, their carefully developed content, and continuing discussion of museums in general suggest the increasing interest and awareness regarding museums as structures that both stimulate and interrogate varying modes of visitor learning and interaction. Both exhibits examined in this paper are examples of how contemporary curators and theorists are working toward providing a new museum experience for visitors. The Hall of Human Origins innovated with using technology that is often already in visitors’ hands is one way of expanding visitors’ interaction with display material beyond a single visit. Our Peoples; attempt is less technological and more ideologically oriented, demanding visitors pay attention not just to isolated objects but also to their setting and the accompanying texts, which encourage
visitors encountering new and perhaps contradictory information to experience it in its
otherness rather than assimilating it according to comfortable, preconceived values.

One possibility for the future of this study would be to give further consideration
to the work of memory in conjunction with the more formal role of “official” or public
history to provide a base for peoples’ understanding of their past ancestors and for
visitors’ experience with the past of others’ lives exhibited in museums. Building on
Nora and Crane, the museum can be investigated as both metaphor and physical site for
collective memory. The amalgamation of “individual memories” in visitors and
“academic intentions” in curators need not be considered a contamination of the pure
content in the exhibit (Crane 7); rather, memory can be appreciated as a “sixth sense”
through which visitors can perceive, experience, and create connections with objects
and cultures.

As the Hall of Human Origins’ careful planning, fundraising, and far-reaching
projects of suggest, American museums are expanding, and will continue to play a role
throughout the globalization, homogenization, and digitization of cultures. Karp and
Lavine claim that American cultural institutions are “debating [their] own pluralism—
uncertain that the melting pot works or should work, in search of some territory of
shared culture, uneasy about the place of the United States in the international arena”
(8). Therefore, museums should shy away neither from treating this pluralism, nor from
their duty to ethically reflect their nation’s cultures and citizenry. Indeed, the museum
community must continue “to explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain
consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await” to play a role in
“reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups and perhaps help construct a new idea of ourselves as a nation” (8, emphasis added).

One cultural project that merits further thought and study if it continues to lobby for space on the National Mall is the proposed “Museum of the American People” (subsequently, the MAP). The museum’s treatment of acculturation, cultural identity, and citizenship politics could shape or challenge the dependence between museum systems and their nation-state. The MAP arose from questions such as “how many ethnic, racial, and national origin museums is too many?” (Roig-Franzia Q2) and is currently “challenging notions of identity” and bringing up questions about “who should get what and who should pay for it when it comes to the area in and around the national lawn.” The MAP proposes an alternative to the constant division and specialization of cultural identities, and the groups who are authorized to represent them since it would “attempt to tell the story of all of the people who became Americans, from the prehistoric period through today.” The rhetoric behind “becoming American” implies a sense of accomplishment, victory, and completeness in the acquiring one dominant identity and set of cultural values. Aspiring to inclusion in a museum for and of all American people on the National Mall constitutes an immense oversimplification and indeed negation of experiencing political and cultural difference.

By starting out in the “prehistoric period,” the museum would seem to assert that Native American genocide, African American enslavement, and American neoimperialist and immigration policies are part of the necessary, victorious goal of “becoming American.” Indeed, Sam Eskenazi, the creator of the MAP concept, says
that “everybody’s story is included in the museum” (Roig-Franzia Q2) because narratives of differing ancestry, geographic displacement, cultural affinity, and political agency are all essentialized down to their lowest common denominator: being American. This project gets creative in its search for funding, which again reflects back towards its self-conceived relationship to the nation-state since Eskenazi’s plan does not involve federal funding. In fact, “the Museum of the American People would instead rely entirely on private donations, including donations from foreign governments” (Q3, emphasis added), leading to extra-national debts and allegiances which clearly transcend the self-sufficiency of “becoming American.”

Eskenazi’s proposal stems from the concern that “every ethnic group in the nation would want to have its own museum” which says “we’re all separate instead of together” (Q3). The MAP would instead represent an encyclopedic and universalizing approach to American identities in history, but its display decisions will be fraught with political and economic concerns, since its funding plan could allow for a few countries to buy cultural control in the museum space. In fact, how can the curators decide how to divide up the space, artifacts, and representational rhetoric of the museum among the different groups claiming they “became American”? While there are obvious practical, financial, and geographic limitations to the needs of an “infinite number of groups, each demanding its own museum” (Q3), the MAP’s plan seems to promote the need to assimilate into the exceptionalism of the American nation-state. The viability and popularity of this proposal is worth following over the next few years, as the space on the National Mall dwindles, since it could provide useful information into the changing
representations of hybrid cultures, visitors’ self-perceptions and expectations, and the future insularity or expansion between cultural institutions and political bodies.

As proposed, the MAP assumes the centrality of peoples’ citizenship for inhabiting an identity, claiming a culture, and performing agency. The Hall of Human Origins also strives to create a sense of essential, natural unity, against which any resistance seems negative or at least foolish. The NMAI, however, explores the defamiliarizing potential of representing cultural and temporal others, which can evoke alienation rather than assimilation in the visitor. Therefore, an important possibility to consider in the future is whether a museum should not attempt to make its visitors familiar and contented with its objects, methods, stories. Since uncomfortable confrontation is “alienation that allows space for reflection, argument, and understanding the problem” (Crew and Sims 173), the ability of embracing and navigating marginality to dispute the intended and presumed centrality of one group or culture should be investigated. Gomez-Peña writes that “the border is not an abyss that will have to save us from threatening otherness, but a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore becomes comprehensible” (67). Forms of cultural production and experience that rely precisely on the continuity of a border for a position of marginality or liminality provide a different perspective for cultural expressions.

Both bell hooks and Gomez-Peña articulate that intentionally writing, creating, and performing from the margins can provide an open site for conscious resistance and intervention. bell hooks compellingly explains the possibility of chosen marginality “as
a location of radical openness and possibility” (152); a space which “is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonizer/colonized” (153). Groups can therefore claim “marginality” in the operations, design, and representations of their museum, embracing the power and threat of the border’s distance from the center, and not assimilating to the mainstream models of museology. Through the power play of appropriating and submitting material and psychological cultural traditions to aestheticizing, commodifying, and neutralizing display practices, “we are in danger of depoliticizing what we present” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 432–33). But art, history, and culture museums exist only through the power of the producers and actors to create evocative and communicable narratives of those cultures represented in the exhibits. Therefore, while institutions gather this power in order to construct their own agendas and transfer their own versions of cultural knowledge to visitors, museums must consciously show the workings of power and authority in their exhibits—through consultation, object collection, display transparency, and interpretive plurality—and therefore “share the power museums usually keep” (Smith and Rosen), as Our Peoples attempts to do, with all the groups who collaborate to make meaning.
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