

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures. Edited by W. Richard West.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wh2z16r>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Mithlo, Nancy Marie

Publication Date

2001

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

“Web Sites about Native Americans” (pp. 257–321). This annotated bibliography alone is well worth the price of the book.

Although the focus of the second edition of *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children* is primarily on elementary school programs, this well-researched book belongs in the hands of all educators—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary—interested in teaching about American Indians. This book not only challenges stereotypes and misperceptions in the current mainstream curriculum, but also offers educators numerous suggestions and resources to present fair, accurate portrayals of the rich diversity of American Indians in their classrooms—a view of America that will serve all students well.

Jaye T. Darby

San Diego State University

The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures. Edited by W. Richard West. Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2000. 120 pages. \$25.00 cloth.

The Changing Presentation of the American Indian chronicles the thoughts of seven museum professionals as they negotiate what editor W. Richard West terms a “museological shift” to incorporate Native peoples’ voices in museum exhibitions. West, the founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), a part of the Smithsonian Institution, asserts the volume’s preeminence as the first to “tackle seriously” this topic. The NMAI is positioned by West and several contributors as the forerunner in addressing Native concerns. This apparent self-aggrandizement negates the work of several contributors to the volume (two of them tribal museum directors) and overlooks decades of efforts by others dedicated to accomplishing the same goal of self-determination in cultural-resource management.

The result of a 1995 symposium of the same name, *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian* is presented as the first dialogue of its type, although collective organizing by Native museum professionals has been ongoing since the 1970s. Canada was on the forefront of these efforts with the Woodlands Cultural Centre of Brantford, Ontario, opening in 1972, followed by the Kwakiutl Museum of Cape Mudge in 1979, and the U’Mista Cultural Centre of Alert Bay British Columbia in 1980. The 1987 convocation, led by Alfred Youngman at the University of Lethbridge, hosted a similar panel to the Smithsonian’s 1995 “Changing Presentation” symposium titled “Canada’s Major Art Institutions and Artists of Native Ancestry—Policies and Responsibilities.”

Here in the United States, tribes actively established their own cultural centers some twenty years ago, with the Makah Cultural and Research Center of Neah Bay, Washington, opening in 1979. Early repatriation efforts included the Pueblo of Zuni’s reclamation of several Ahayu:da from the Denver Art Museum in 1980 following their 1978 tribal council resolution on sacred

objects and the concurrent passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. Tribal museum professional Richard W. Hill Sr. called for the Native inclusion championed in West's volume as early as 1982. The University of California's American Indian Studies Center's conference on contemporary American Indian issues featured Hill's essay "The Impact of a Museum on a Native Community," which advocated the hiring of Native American consultants and staff as essential steps toward equity in museum representation. In addition, the work of the Native American Rights Fund and the Morning Star Institute were essential components of this movement toward a new museology. Such contributions and efforts should be acknowledged.

Even this volume's essays provide examples that negate the claim that NMAI is responsible for new interpretative models. Janice Clements, a member of the board of directors at the Museum at Warm Springs in Oregon and a member of the Warm Springs tribe, states in her essay that in 1968 tribal leaders began setting aside \$50,000 a year for the purchase of Native artifacts for their museum. Joycelyn Wedll, director of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwa, identifies the year 1919—when traders settled near the Mille Lacs Reservation and began collecting items that would eventually become the basis of the museum's collections—the starting point for her museum.

This clarification of historical precedence is essential, I think, because NMAI is a logical outgrowth of these scattered and important initial efforts. I find it disturbing that NMAI is seen as the destination point for all Native self-determination efforts in the arts when so many tribes, individuals, and even non-Native agencies have created the environment in which the Smithsonian's efforts may now take place. Scholars such as Douglas Cole, Nancy Parezo, Michael Ames, and George Stocking also framed this dialogue and made international efforts to preserve cultural treasures.

The book presents a variety of approaches to incorporating a Native voice into museum settings. While some contributors to the volume see hiring Native Americans in museums as the solution to problems of representation, others mark this logic faulty due to the inherent inequality of power between mainstream cultural institutions and Native communities. Michael Ames article starts from the supposition of inclusion, providing one of the most challenging contributions to the book as he systematically addresses the problems inherent in such an easy fix. Despite efforts to include Native peoples on museums' staffs, minimal change has taken place due to declining budgets, the time it takes new appointees to reach senior levels, allegations of tokenism, and an incompatibility between Native values and museum culture. Ames elaborates further by attempting to delineate an aboriginal curatorial perspective. He concludes that the aboriginal perspective is more holistic and personal than traditional curatorial norms.

The manner in which these perceived differences play out in the mainstream press is examined in David Penny's essay. Penny unflinchingly documents the derision and hostility of the *New York Times* to NMAI's 1992 "Pathways of Tradition" exhibition, which was characterized as a "mess" and a "fuzzy-headed muddle" that "blunders" in its presentation. He argues that the

“non-art identities” of the objects on display are seen by formalists to distract from the objects themselves. This juxtaposition of object as both art and cultural indicator is creatively explored by Penny in the example of the 1991 American Museum of Natural History’s exhibit “Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch.” Penny suggests that while the museum presented an exhibit about potlatches, the Kwakiutl treated the exhibit as a potlatch. Penny also examines the ways in which indigenous exhibits, such as “Fluffs and Feathers,” organized by Tom Hill for the Woodland Cultural Centre and Gerald McMaster’s “Savage Graces,” manage to convey the irony of Native museum professionals challenging conventional practice more effectively than the Smithsonian. He notes however, that these smaller venues lack the public draw and press attention that would significantly alter habitual ways of thinking.

James Nason identifies the local history museum as the primary conveyor of knowledge about Native Americans in this country. Such an observation is apt but depressing, for these institutions often lack the resources to alter their classic portrayal of Natives as purely historical figures. Nason concludes that museums create and are created by the communities they serve. This formula is challenged in practice by multicultural constituents and staff and by the blending of the separate and distinct categories Nason employs—the academic curator and the Native American specialist. Nason appears to accept these “separate but equal” interpretative worlds by concluding that they are mutually exclusive. The holistic perspective essential to Native interpretation is difficult if not impossible to achieve, for, as Nason asserts, the complex meanings that encompass a Native understanding of objects cannot be represented in a museum display.

The recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as a valid academic premise is alluded to throughout the text of this book but is not examined in any systemic manner. It is easy to insist that the Native perspective be incorporated in museum exhibitions, but what characteristics define this perspective and how does one manage within the tightly constructed systems of reception that are unmotivated to alter their standard ideologies? Michael Ames concludes that museums are inherently conservative and hold self-perpetuation as a first priority. The revision of internal museum cultures and professions, including traditional curatorial prerogatives, is seen to be dependent on the ability of Native Americans to take an active partnership role with institutions.

While the burden of enacting change certainly appears to rest with Native communities, the cultural institution of the museum continues to be explored by Native museum professionals as a valid forum for expressing contemporary Native lives. The challenge lies in applying a Native perspective to standard curatorial and interpretative practices and this development hinges largely on the manner in which we train Native Americans in museum studies. As a museum studies educator at a tribal college, I know the challenges facing Native people who want to become accredited in the field. Graduate training programs are few and expensive, admissions are selective, high schools on reservations do not adequately prepare our students for graduate work, and without the graduate degree our students are forever

stuck in the basements of anthropological holdings sorting through a mess of poorly documented artifacts.

In addition to a lack of training programs available to Native scholars, the dangers of working with contaminated objects are becoming painfully evident. Chemical treatments of historic artifacts have created a workplace hazard for museum professional trainees. While I previously placed students in collections management posts typical of internship duties, I now advise students to go straight for the graduate degree so they can work on an administrative level, hiring out for the collections work. It is this level of practical application that will really be the deciding factor for Native American participation in museums—not solely the ideological constructs examined in this volume.

Nancy Marie Mithlo

Institute of American Indian Arts

Contemporary American Indian Writing: Unsettling Literature. By Dee Horne. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. 218 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Dee Horne, a professor of First Nations literature at the University of Northern British Columbia, has produced a thoroughly researched, in-depth discussion of six established, indigenous Canadian writers that includes welcome explanatory notes, a comprehensive bibliography and an index. Her subtitle, *Unsettling Literature*, derives from her identification of non-Native culture in North America as “settler culture,” a term she uses throughout along with “settler(s),” to distinguish the descendants of colonial powers and the worldview of those who would dominate, assimilate, and otherwise perpetuate cultural genocide, consciously or unconsciously, on Native populations. Horne successfully argues that her selected works by Thomas King (Cherokee), Ruby Slipperjack (Ojibwa), Beatrice Culleton (Métis), Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan), Lee Maracle (Métis/Salish), and Tomson Highway (Cree) are “unsettling” in that these works go beyond resistance to settler culture. Their writings posit alternative positions, outside either “mimicry” (assimilation) or resistance, which are adaptable, flexible, traditional, and indigenous.

The audiences for Horne’s book are varied but clearly scholastic. Her preface and introductory chapter place her work theoretically in a postcolonial discourse and place the author, as a non-Native reader, within her capacity to address various audiences within her own limitations. These discussions would be most helpful, I believe, for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, either Native or non-Native, who would benefit from her model of openness in acknowledging the influences of her culture and the effects of her authorship. Students and possibly instructors could also benefit from the scope of her theoretical overview and the discussion of how it applies and does not apply to her subject. Based on these introductory essays, and the more accessible chapters that follow, I would certainly recommend the book as a text in a graduate course.