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# **Ravens, Storms, and the Ecological Indian at the National Museum of the American Indian**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The postindian simulations are the core of  
survivance, the new stories of tribal courage.

—*Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners: Postindian  
Warriors of Survivance*

Against a cold February wind I walked down 4th Street toward the new National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). My eyes and being felt relief the moment I saw it. The museum's complex layers and curves of sand-colored limestone and surrounding native vegetation represent an island of organic form in a sea of gray linearity. Most agree that the architecture is a success. People (Indian and non-Indian alike) are much less certain about the success of what is *inside* the new Indian museum on the Washington mall. I was there to experience and review what one native colleague called "our new Indian lodge in the Capitol."

I went to the NMAI for a few specific reasons, both personal and professional. Being an Anishinaabe/Métis scholar-activist, I experienced the new NMAI through several different lenses. I wanted to see what a well-funded "Indian-made" museum would look and feel like. What are the stories, textures, images, messages, and sounds that Indian people want to share with the world? For various reasons I missed the grand opening and procession in September 2004. Having missed that historic *moment*,

I was ready to experience this historic *space* firsthand. I also wanted to get a sense of that rare collective energy that symbolically united the indigenous peoples of the Americas—an energy that brought Native Americans together for the common goal of reclaiming, recreating, and celebrating a native space of survivance.

For a few months in the fall of 2004, Indians were positively “in.” We were all over the media, and not in terms of the usual gaming controversies, land disputes, or health tragedies. All of a sudden, modern, living Indians were everywhere—in major newspapers and magazines (*New York Times*, *Time Magazine*), on national radio (National Public Radio and numerous other programs and stations), TV, local press, and obviously all over the grassroots Indian news outlets. By 2005, however, the fanfare had faded, the crowds lessened, and, in the dead of winter, the new museum stood more available for an intimate encounter.

As the executive director of the Cultural Conservancy, a non-profit indigenous rights organization, I have dedicated the last dozen years of my professional life to the protection of Native American lands and cultures, so I first and foremost wanted to examine how the Indian relationship to the land was represented in the museum. What is the meaning of native place in the context of a public museum? How are sacred lands represented?

My colleagues and I in the American Indian Studies department and Ethnic Studies program at San Francisco State University were excited to experience this museum and review and critique it from our various backgrounds. After the grand opening, I heard and read a lot of stories and reports—good, ambivalent, and bad. I heard different perspectives from Indian leaders, artists, grassroots activists, professors, and Euro-American participants, historians, and critics. It was time to see for myself.

Transitioning out of the frigid air into the warm welcome circle of the Potomac rotunda at the eastern main entrance to the museum, I had a few specific questions on my mind. Being a specialized generalist, my interests were in the intersections of traditional knowledge, native ecology, sacred space, and California Indians. I wondered if and how multiple indigenous epistemologies were characterized and communicated? Is the Ecological Indian on display at the NMAI? How is native land and sacred space defined and/or symbolized? How is the relationship between native peoples and the environment portrayed? Are California Natives represented at NMAI, and if so, how?

This essay will attempt to address each of these questions but will focus on how native epistemologies and the Native American–environment relationship are represented at the NMAI. Through multidisciplinary perspectives my review and analysis will be informed, both explicitly and implicitly, by two conceptual frameworks. One is the trickster discourse of Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor and his

concepts of "postindian" and "survivance" (the latter term is used extensively at the NMAI). Trickster discourse is a form of intellectual engagement, writing, and analysis that challenges logical positivism and Cartesian dualism with more creative, imaginative, and ironic understandings.<sup>1</sup> By "postindian" Vizenor means modern Indian people whose identities are ethnically mixed, empowered, complex, and "new" to the world. By "survivance," he means the survival of Native Americans after five hundred years of systematic attempts at genocide by nation-states. Survivance is more than simple survival; it is also creative development, growth, and evolution. Native peoples did not only reflexively react to colonization through fierce defense or passive acceptance. Native peoples responded in a multitude of ways, creatively adapting, and incorporating valued new elements while maintaining some traditional ways.

The second framework I use is the spatial construct used by Arturo Escobar in the political definitions of space and place. I emphasize this spatial dimension not only because of my own background in environmental studies but because the NMAI emphasizes place and space in most of their literature, books, and in the exhibits. Paraphrasing Keith Basso's term and book title *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Escobar claims, "culture sits in places."<sup>2</sup> He describes place as having three primary characteristics: (1) it is grounded (however unstable); (2) it is bound (however permeable); and (3) it is connected to everyday life.<sup>3</sup> He contrasts place with space, that is, abstract, ahistorical, globalized, and ready to be capitalized. Place is local, diverse, specific, and tied to distinct peoples and cultural identities. Space is global, uniform, general, and tied to the "erasure of place," the homogenization of peoples, and "monocultures of the mind."<sup>4</sup> Place, as defined here, is integral to Native American identities. Every distinct tribal group of the Americas comes from different places and therefore has diverse epistemologies, knowledge systems, and identities.

Using these conceptually useful frameworks and others to help analyze exhibits at the museum, I affirm that the NMAI is a significant new site of postIndian identity making and place making. I also wonder if the new Indian museum missed an opportunity to educate the public about the "disease of displacement" and the intergenerational trauma created by the "erasure of place."<sup>5</sup>

**THE ORDER OF NATIVE IMAGINATION:  
TRICKSTER AS NARRATOR**

He dazzles you right out of water,  
Right out of the moon, the sun and fire.  
Cocksure smooth talker, good looker,  
Raven makes a name for himself

Up and down the coast from the Nass River,  
Stirs things up.

—Robert H. Davis (*Tlingit*) in *Native Universe*:

*Voices of Indian America*, edited by Gerald

McMaster and Clifford Trafzer

Of the three main exhibitions, we are directed to start at the top floor, in the Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World gallery. Upon entering this gallery, the very first image we see is the Trickster Raven. In this first exhibit, "How Raven Stole the Sun," we see Raven holding the sun, a beautiful orange glowing orb in its long black beak. It is a stunning opening image of a classic Pacific Northwest symbol created as a modern glass raven sculpture. Already we see something ancient and modern together; something mixed, combined, adapted. It also shows us that at the NMAI, Trickster is narrator. This means that trickster discourses are going to be used to articulate, complicate, and introduce the viewer to a variety of native perspectives.<sup>6</sup> The trickster as narrator tells us from the beginning that this is not going to be a simplified, clear, linear explication. The viewer is not going to be spoon fed information in a Westernized, academic fashion. Entering and understanding this museum is going to be complex, challenging, and sometimes confusing. One must work to participate in the information and to question one's own beliefs, assumptions, and expectations. There will be uncertainty, ambivalence, and paradox. Where one might expect tragedy, as in an exhibit on the persecution of traditional Indian religious practices, one may find irony in terms of Indian quotes and stories celebrating their Christian faith. Where one might expect some pride in the way Indians were represented in recent, more politically correct Indian movies like *Dances with Wolves*, one may find anger and resentment from Indians who are upset about again being essentialized and forced into the proud, primitive Noble Savage myth. Raven "stirs things up" at the NMAI and provides many surprises and conundrums. One of these surprises was the simulated blue storm of colonization.

### THE STORM OF FIRST CONTACTS

One of the most fascinating exhibits I experienced at NMAI was "The Eye of the Storm," in the Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories gallery. It was a truly postmodern, "postindian" installation. This circular space of natural sounds, changing colors, and a blue curvilinear wall with several TV screens showed a film on storms and hurricanes. At first glance, this film looks like it could be a Weather Channel program. "The storm" is described quite literally, as a natural force and phenomena of wind and water that rips through communities at unexpected times, leaving homes devastated, trees uprooted, lives lost.

It is unpredictable and exhibits the raw destructive force of nature. Afterward, the wind and rain stop, the earth is cleansed, renewed, and for those that survive, it is a new beginning. This storm is also a cultural storm. Paul Chaat of NMAI called it "the firestorm of contact" on an adjacent panel on survivance. The storm is an appropriate metaphor for the meeting of the Native American and the European colonizer.

The storm film vocalizes the big, cosmological picture: the balance of life and death, creation and destruction as an ongoing natural process of life on Earth and in the universe. As the Earth creates and destroys through new life forms and what we two-leggeds call "natural disasters," so humans reflect this ability to heal and create or harm and destroy. "Within every person, the potential for positive, constructive action and negative, destructive behavior exists. The stories teach that this is the way of life on Earth."<sup>7</sup> Some of the statements made in this film include: "Is there anything more Indian than a Winchester rifle?" "We are the storm." "We are Christians saved by Jesus." "The storm is an opportunity—it teaches us many things." "We have learned many things."

This installation was fittingly situated between the Guns and the Bibles, between the exhibits entitled, Coiled Dragons and God's Work, respectively. It had no title, no words on a wall, no interpretation. It was a disorienting space in its naked simplicity but also because you were surrounded by a mass of changing neon-blue lights that elicited a high-tech, eerie feeling. It intrigued me that there were absolutely no written word markers in this circular installation. There was a fascinating round display case in the middle of it. Under glass inside the case were various objects on top of a red and black cloth. The four cardinal directions were identified with four distinct rocks. Most of the objects looked like religious instruments: staves, stones, seeds, a feather fan, a small pottery bowl, a black cowboy hat turned upside down. Again, no written description of what we were looking at but I felt like I was viewing a postmodern intertribal medicine wheel.

I liked this space and spent twenty to thirty minutes in the Eye of the Storm on two separate days. The first time I was there I was the only person in it, which is saying a lot since each exhibit is usually surrounded by a dozen or more people. The second time I experienced it, I brought in colleague Joanne Barker to get her opinion on it. People would look in, walk through, but not stand there and watch the short film. I stood there for at least twenty minutes and not one person took more than a couple of moment to peek in. Why was this? Was the space too ambiguous? Too modern? Why was this installation so uninviting to the hordes of people who swarmed around Geronimo's rifle just around the corner? The lack of direction, narration, or any written text clearly disoriented people. But isn't this precisely the point with trickster narration? The experience in that installation transcended any simple, logical message or conclusion about the storm of colonization.

Anyone willing to stand in the middle of that blue storm will understand that the calm to look for is the calm in the hurricane's heart.

The short storm film does have a male Indian voice, a narrator, who seems to honor and welcome the storm of colonization not because it had a net positive effect but because *it is what actually happened* and there is no going back. It commemorates the hybrid effects and consequences of colonization in terms of guns, repression, slavery, massacres, Christianity, boarding schools, and treaties. The point is not to belittle these atrocities one bit but to recognize the diversity of tribal responses to these colonial processes. The storm installation also embodies the profound contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities that many of today's Indian people feel when they look back at these instruments of oppression.

Ultimately, trickster narration is a useful hermeneutics for transcending the oversimplified binary thinking so prevalent in Western thought. It is a useful device to play with reversals, to "storm back" the meaning of this historic encounter of the red and white peoples and disrupt the tragic victim stereotype. To retell the story that has been thrust on Indian people is a necessary transformation of narrative that is an essential aspect of decolonization. "The postindian warriors are new indications of a narrative recreation, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance."<sup>8</sup> We ask ourselves again, "Is there anything more Indian than a Winchester Rifle?"

The storm installation provokes, disturbs, challenges, and questions. This installation evoked a wide range of emotions and confronted a number of my own assumptions. For example, seeing the gun as not only an instrument of death for Indians but also an instrument of hope; or the Christian Cross as not only a tool of religious persecution but as the true and only symbol of eternal life for many Indian peoples today. My own Westernized, colonized mind was challenged and transformed from this almost hypnotic, intensely unsettling installation.

**TRANSCENDING STEREOTYPES:  
PUBLIC ENCOUNTER OF  
THE BRAIDLESS INDIAN**

In the Our Peoples gallery, an excellent short film in the Making History exhibit discusses some of the legacies of colonization in terms of erroneous historical and media representations. It dispels many of the common stereotypes about Indians and outlines the contradictions between Indian realities and anthropologists' and Hollywood's fantasies. At the end of this film, the viewer is invited to respect the information shared at NMAI but to do so with skepticism. We are invited to "encounter it. Explore it. Reflect on it. Argue with it." This invitation to confront assumptions and think critically is one of the most exciting

aspects of this new museum, especially as it is situated in our nation's capitol and opened under the current administration. The invitation to intellectually encounter the information shared is a fundamental, reciprocal engagement process used in many indigenous forms of education, and it was refreshing to see it being used so well at NMAI in the context of Washington, D.C., from where so many acts of genocide and oppression have been ordered.

But some visitors and critics may find this reciprocal engagement process too demanding. Making the general public work to understand Indian perspectives and interpretations seems absolutely appropriate and historically fitting, given the storm that took place and continues to occur for Indian people. Ongoing cultural genocide persists every time Indians are denied religious freedom, federal recognition, treaty rights, a "seat at the table," and other fundamental rights. Given recent cracks exposed in the proud mask of ignorance worn by the dominant American society, it is time, as many ethnic scholars have stated, that the colonizer's gaze gets turned on itself. Here I refer to the public exposure and prosecution of the perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse in missionary and government boarding schools in the United States and Canada. Additionally, the financial success of gaming tribes has made tribal leaders major political players in local, state, and national arenas. They are an economic and political force to reckon with. Also, the once-"primitive" knowledge of Native Americans is being validated by biologists, climatologists, physicists, medical doctors, and other Western "experts" who are looking to indigenous peoples for cures, formulas, predictions, and scientific models. The tragic Indian victim is transforming; the power dynamics are shifting. The so-called authorities of history are not necessarily moving backstage but are being forced to share the stage and step aside by Native leaders who are saying, "you have spoken for us long enough. It is our time and place to speak for ourselves."

Are visitors to the NMAI accepting this new direction? That an NMAI visitor must intellectually and psychologically engage with the exhibits to understand what the various Indian nations want to share is not too much to ask of a human being. But it may be a lot to ask of a general public that is used to twenty-second sound bites on radio, TV, and news headlines. Such media conditioning does not discriminate between natives and non-Natives; we are all affected. So who will stand there and engage the exhibits?

Based on some basic conversations in the museum, Euro-American visitors to the museum are definitely challenged with this unique approach. As one middle-aged white man stated, "This is a confusing exhibit because there is no real starting point and it doesn't show any chronological history."<sup>9</sup> Many other visitors mentioned that they were confused, disoriented, and did not find what they expected.

I assume they expected the usual linear, chronological exhibits, with timelines and arrows directing them to the next panel, explained to them in a third-person authoritarian voice. Other visitors, however, responded more positively when asked what they thought of the museum. A woman in her late thirties replied, "At first it's confusing, and then I realized there is a logic to it."<sup>10</sup> I wish I could have asked her what logic she thought that was. Did she truly understand a "logic," or did she simply stop looking for a familiar one?

**CURIOSITY KILLS THE BUFFALO:  
THE RESPONSIBILITY TO NOT KNOW**

Given the vast cultural diversity of the Native peoples of the Americas, it is virtually impossible to generalize about "Indians," but a few themes seem fairly common and consistent. In many Native American societies, for example, knowledge is not a commodity to be bought and sold like it is today in our Western academic system. "Coming to know"<sup>11</sup> is a process that comes with great and often grave responsibilities, especially if it is sacred religious knowledge. Many Native scholars, especially those coming from the Haudenosaunee, or Six Nations Iroquois, refer to rights and responsibilities as two interdependent aspects.<sup>12</sup> Acquiring knowledge always comes with personal responsibilities, but the dominant society does not often teach or emphasize this. Consequently, most Americans assume they have the right to learn anything they want. We can go to colleges and universities, read books, go to libraries, museums, lectures, workshops, surf the Internet, use the Freedom of Information Act, read magazines and government documents, and talk to experts. Living in America, every day we have the opportunity to consume information (in fact we can't avoid it) in hundreds of different forms. This information age has provided many social benefits in terms of education and entertainment. For example, it has given people tools to be able to teach themselves, build networks, do research, expose injustices, and support initiatives and campaigns. But media overexposure and the barrage of daily sound bites has also numbed us and dumbed us down to shorter and shorter attention spans<sup>13</sup> and has created the pervasive expectation that any type of knowledge or information should be available to us at any time. And, for many reasons, non-Native people interested in (or more likely "fascinated with") Native American history and issues tend to be insatiably acquisitive. "Tell me about your language?" "Your stories?!" "Can I record your conversations?" "I want to know the secrets of your ritual ceremonies?" This "right to know" has actually inhibited true education, because the "wannabe" culture-vulture urge trivializes tribal information. It becomes hyperexoticized or banal without its sociocultural contexts.

Indigenous knowledge, local knowledge, and especially sacred knowledge often have defined parameters and limits. It is hard for

people to understand that not everyone in an Indian nation, band, clan, or family has the right to know anything they want. As Paula Gunn Allen so clearly puts it, "Among the Pueblos, a person is expected to know no more than is necessary, sufficient and congruent with their spiritual and social place. One does not tell or inquire about matters that do not directly concern one."<sup>14</sup> This philosophical respect for the limits of knowing and the importance of privacy and modesty cannot be overestimated. It is not simply an act of politeness. Allen continues, "to step beyond the bounds of the required propriety was to put myself and others at risk. One did not inquire about or tell about matters that were not hers or his to know or discuss."<sup>15</sup> Clearly the Pueblo and the Western worldviews regarding access to knowledge are quite different. The NMAI appears to try to balance these different perspectives by being selective about what and how information is shared. Many NMAI visitors I spoke with were confused by the selection and interpretation of certain stories, objects, and the combination of different historical periods within the same exhibit. Others were curious to learn more about famous battles in history and about certain religious practices.

The deeper pedagogical issue here is whether people can accept that some things should be left unknown or are unknowable without cultural context. Some things should be known only after we have been prepared to know them. From a Native perspective, no one has the right to know something unless one has a specific reason and purpose and will make the sacrifices to take responsibility for acquiring that knowledge. Many non-Natives assume they have the right to access tribal knowledge and the permission to consume and regurgitate it however they want. This greed for knowledge and lack of respect for cultural privacy is so pervasive in our American society that we don't even realize we are conditioned by it. Consequently, many may be disappointed with those exhibits at the NMAI where the tribal curators elect not to reveal the whole story; the curators obviously have been selective in what they share, as is the case with all history makers and educators. Visitors/viewers must actively engage, ask questions, suspend assumptions, and challenge their own stereotypes and beliefs to truly "come to know" the deeper meanings and messages the various tribal curators wanted to share. Explicitly choosing to not know or not share something is not pride in ignorance or deceit; it is respect for limits, restraint, privacy, and cultural difference.

**"SAVIORS OF THE ENVIRONMENT":  
THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN MYTH AND  
THE PLACE-BASED CULTURAL REALITY**

In the *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories* gallery, a short film in the *Making History* exhibit discusses the subjectivity of history and

warns that Indian people have been negatively stereotyped since their first contacts with outsiders. The narrator also shares that today, fortunately, those harmful images are changing. We are told that this is "the alchemy that changes the past into stories." One of the most pervasive stereotypes of Native Americans is the Ecological Indian. As the narrator of the film says, "we are viewed as saviors of the environment, barbarians and noble savages, the lowest form of humanity, sometimes, all at once; rarely are we seen as human beings."

The Ecological Indian is one part of a binary system promulgated around the world by anthropologists, historians, writers, New Age followers, and sometimes by Indians themselves. According to this stereotyped belief, Native Americans, and often all "primitive" indigenous peoples, have an innate, race-based mystical connection to nature that makes them especially attuned to when nature is in or out of balance with the rest of the world. It is a belief that Indians are the "original environmentalists," who know how to live in harmony with all of the plants, creatures, and other aspects of the environment. According to this "ecologically noble savage" myth, he does not gain his environmental awareness through careful observation and other Native scientific methods but through some inherent, essential bond Indian people have with the more-than-human natural world. The Ecological Indian is innocent, carefree, wise, almost like Adam and Eve before the Fall, or like wildlife, unconsciously living in nature by primitive instincts.

The other half of this stereotype is the "ecologically harmful savage" (often referred to as the "ignoble savage"), who is not only less environmentally conscious than modern Americans who recycle but is actually quite selfish, menacing, and destructive to the environment. Historically, this ignoble savage is accused of driving species extinct, setting fire to large forests, draining rivers and lakes, and other acts of ecological damage. Today he is accused of killing whales, eagles, and other endangered species "for no good reason," of supporting oil drilling and other dirty industries, and of being prodevelopment as an economic opportunity created by gaming revenues.

Colin Calloway clearly describes a significant metaphysical root to the Ecological Indian stereotype and phenomenon: "Some non-Indians have always attributed to Native American cultures things their own society lacked, lost, or corrupted."<sup>16</sup> I would add to his astute observation that a combination of the Christian culture complex's obsession with purity and sin, gods and devils, "us and them," and secular science's obsession with logical positivism and rational control fuels this limiting projection of the Indian as either an Edenic and ecologically noble savage or a post-Edenic savage sinner. The Ecological Indian is either simple, pure, and in tune with nature, or savage, selfish, and harmful to the land. Inherent in both images is a conspicuous lack of understanding of the diversity and humanness of Native Americans.

Like every other human being, Native peoples have the potential for creation and destruction and, like others, rarely exhibit only one end of the spectrum but move in the gray zone between, exhibiting extreme, moderate, and contradictory behavior.

Historically, there has not been much room in academia or popular media for any other interpretation of Native Americans' relationship to the natural world. Unexamined in this grossly oversimplified dualistic stereotype are the meanings of and political agendas behind culturally loaded terms like *nature*, *culture*, *civilization*, *wilderness*, *homeland*, *territory*, *place*, *balance*, *harmony*, *kinship*, and *animism*. They are all important and culturally relative words that require investigation and clear definition.<sup>17</sup> Again, the "either/or" dual thinking of Western thought has limited any honest, careful reflection on Native Americans' diverse and complex relationship to the natural world.<sup>18</sup>

#### **TENDING THE SACRED IN SELF AND PLACE**

Western civilization has been invested in viewing American Indians in certain, usually demeaning ways to help justify Manifest Destiny, the dispossession of Indian lands, and the cultural genocide of diverse Indian nations. Political motivations usually fuel the colonizer's stereotypes of the colonized. Once the Other is dehumanized, any action against them can be justified in the name of ethnocentric and religious superiority. But paraphrasing Colin Colloway's quote, people (especially of a dominant society) often project onto "the Other" things that their own culture "lacked, lost, or corrupted." This tendency, combined with dualistic Western thought, supports the the Ecological Indian stereotype. Modern America's dominant society approaches the environment in two primary ways: (1) exploit all of the natural resources for capitalistic and personal gain and (2) "protect" it by locking it up away from any human use except recreation. It's either mass exploitation of the lands and waters by various industries or a hands-off approach where large tracts of land, such as The Nature Conservancy reserves or national parks, are controlled by primarily white, upper-class environmental groups. This does not leave any room for what most Native peoples do, which is tend to the sacred through place-based, regular interaction, i.e., tending, harvesting, managing, singing to and praying for the plants, animals, insects, birds, fish, mushrooms, and other "relatives" of traditional places. Native peoples have been systematically cut off from this type of environmental interaction due to removal, reservation, and the disease of dislocation discussed below.

Is the Ecological Indian true? Yes, in many cases Native peoples have carefully managed their resources and taken care of their local ecosystems. Is the Ecological Indian false? Yes, in many cases Native

peoples have overexploited resources, miscalculated, made mistakes, and damaged the local environment. Employing Trickster discourse and tetralemma logic, the Ecological Indian is both affirmed and denied, and neither affirmed nor denied. If we can suspend our conditioned binary thinking and embrace paradox over problem solving, we will gain deeper understanding of the Ecological Indian archetype and its reality in history, in the world, and at the NMAI.

Because some Native groups actually *were* ecologically destructive in the past, Native peoples developed elaborate natural laws, "original instructions," taboos, and cultural practices to honor environmental limits and work toward ecological balance. In the Anishinaabe exhibit we are told, "a long time ago, the people were suffering because they had stopped listening to the Creator."<sup>19</sup> Over and over again, the oral traditions of many Indian nations tells us this same story: in the past, sometimes even in the "before worlds," people stopped honoring the "original instructions" and did not care for the Earth and her creatures. Whenever this selfishness takes over, humans are soon to perish. "This awareness of the loss of natural harmony among indigenous peoples brought with it an awareness of fostering sustainable human–earth relations for future generations."<sup>20</sup>

Humans must constantly be wary, because Raven is always hiding in the shadows. It is human to make mistakes. But how do we collectively learn from those mistakes? For many indigenous cultures, this learning happens through teachings in the oral tradition that warn of humans' baser urges and tendencies for misjudgment and error. Greed, envy, arrogance, fear, self-centeredness, and other human traits are represented in the dark side of Trickster—the Tlingit Raven, the Kumeyaay Coyote, the Ojibwe Rabbit, the Iroquois Twins, and the Hopi Clown, to name a few. Indian peoples are explicitly aware of this dark side of human nature and incorporate it into the oral tradition, education, daily life, and religion. It is not a coincidence that most indigenous cultures' religious traditions and environmental knowledge and practices are intimately entwined.<sup>21</sup> It's a matter of life and death. It's a matter of ethics, values, lessons. It is about kinship and relations.

Today Native American knowledge of the environment is finally getting some of the recognition it deserves<sup>22</sup> and is making significant contributions in a variety of scientific and environmental fields. This knowledge is often referred to as Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK), ecological knowledge, or cultural knowledge, and indigenous scientists and educators such as Greg Cajete, Leroy Little Bear, Dennis Martinez, Enrique Salmon, Winona LaDuke, and many others are breaking new ground by bringing TEK into scientific review committees, boards of directors, academic halls, classrooms, scientific journals, government agencies, conferences and training programs, and museums. TEK-influenced fields and subfields include ethnoecology/

ethnobotany, historical ecology, ecological restoration, ecological anthropology/archaeology, resource management, conservation biology, cultural geography, political ecology, and environmental justice. Native peoples' traditional knowledge is also increasingly respected and used by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to conserve biological and cultural diversity around the world.<sup>23</sup> In fact, researchers and scientists in numerous fields are demonstrating a close relationship between biological and cultural diversity and the sophisticated care of biodiversity (native plants, wildlife, and ecosystems) by Native peoples. This field of comanagement, where Native and Western scientists and resource managers together share power and make decisions regarding the care and management of natural resources, is burgeoning around the world, especially in Australia, Alaska, and Hawaii.<sup>24</sup> The philosophy behind this type of comanagement is actually similar to that behind the comanagement and cocuration of exhibits at NMAI. They are both based on the principles of consultation, cooperation, and collaboration.

Given the recent support for indigenous knowledge, the debate over the Ecological Indian is far from over. Although many scientists (Native and non-Native alike) work to articulate, illustrate, and demonstrate the validity of traditional environmental knowledge and practices, some Euro-American scientists and writers continue to perpetuate the idea of the "ecologically harmful savage" who overexploited the natural world.<sup>25</sup>

The most common theories and historical examples used to try to show that Indians were not the "first ecologists," and in fact were and are environmentally destructive, are the Pleistocene megafauna overkill hypothesis, the Anasazi and Hohokam collapse, overexploitation and near extinctions of fur-bearing animals, wasteful killing of the buffalo, and overuse of fire that destroyed forests. Most of these theories and examples are still hotly debated, but most are fueled by one persistent underlying theory: the Bering Strait theory.

This theory hypothesizes that Native Americans were the original colonists to the Americas, migrating to the New World over a land bridge between Alaska and Russia approximately 10,000–14,000 years ago. Seen as the first colonists from Asia, this hypothesis supports the idea that the Americas were *terra nullius*, empty lands awaiting colonization. This theory, which has become "scientific fact," reinforces "the idea that American Indians were not original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere but latecomers who had barely unpacked before Columbus came knocking on the door. If Indians had arrived only a few centuries earlier, they had no real claim to land that could not be swept away by European discovery."<sup>26</sup> There are obviously political motivations associated with this theory because it reinforces and justifies the colonizer's version of history. These political motives fuel scientific collusion and give strength, veracity, and persistence to the Bering Strait theory.

Fortunately, I did not find one mention of this theory in any of the exhibits I reviewed at the NMAI, an absence that troubled some critics. In her essay, "National Myth of the American Indian," Diana Muir writes that Indian nations are depicted as model environmentalists at the NMAI. She thinks that the Ecological Indian stereotype is supported as fact and represents a type of "fictional history . . . common to all national revivals."<sup>27</sup> I agree that Native Americans' relationship to the natural environment is depicted in a mostly positive light, especially in terms of their cosmologies and epistemologies. But Muir finds this depiction particularly troubling, because "environmentalism, according to NMAI, is actually central to Indian religion." Muir here misconstrues the complex Native American ecological-religious traditions and epistemologies as the assertion of the Ecological Indian myth. Muir does not seem to wish to understand the complex diversity of Native peoples from their own perspectives. She seems to wholeheartedly believe in the various examples used above (the Bering Strait theory, species extinction, forest destruction, and soil depletion) to demonstrate that Indians, and Indian religions in particular, did not have "anything that can be stretched to resemble modern ecological ideas." She demonstrates her lack of understanding of indigenous religious traditions and ecology by continuously referring to Indian religions as animistic, and she does so in a condescending way. *Animism*, as a basic dictionary word, is not problematic. But anthropologists, religious scholars, and historians often have used the word synonymously with *superstitious*, *ignorant*, *primitive*, *delusional*, *fear-based*, *fanatical*, and *unreal* when describing Indian religious traditions.

The Our Universes gallery teaches us that Native peoples come from ancestral lands and waters, celestial beings, native homelands, and sacred spaces. "Our philosophies of life come from our ancestors. They taught us to live in harmony with the animals, plants, spirit world, and the people around us."<sup>28</sup> Native Americans are deeply tied to place through ancestors, oral traditions, languages, ceremonies, origin sites, and other connections, such as the practice of many tribes to bury a newborn's umbilical cord and/or placenta in the ground where they are born or in a place with a type of power they want the child to have. Fresh blood meets elder's bones in the fertile earth for an unseen regeneration of kinship. Spirit and matter are not divided, physical and metaphysical worlds merge, and the sacred is immanent and embodied. Indian people respond to and manage their local environments in numerous ways because their languages, worldviews, lifeways, and ancestors are all distinct and place based. As many researchers are pointing out, the biological diversity of the earth shapes the cultural diversity, and the cultural diversity shapes the biological diversity.<sup>29</sup> There is a deep reciprocal relationship between Native cultures and ancestral lands.

Most of the eight tribally specific "universes" in this first gallery

describe how profoundly intimate each of these Indian nations' connection is with their native places. In the Santa Clara Pueblo exhibit, we learn of their fundamental connection to the Corn Mother and ways to honor her through prayer, ritual, and agriculture. In the Anishinaabe exhibit, we learn that to be Anishinaabe means "you know your place in the universe." Lessons of survival are learned from animals and healing powers are learned from plants. The Lakota Universe panel teaches us "everything is inside the sacred circle, the Hocoka." We learn that honoring local, Native places is a fundamental value of traditional Indian cosmologies. But this does not mean that every Indian lives up to these values and worldviews just like every Christian does not live up to the Ten Commandments. But non-Natives raise the moral bar higher for Native Americans. Christians, throughout history and continuing today, have engaged in terrible acts of abuse and violence against other peoples, especially native peoples, and they are still considered Christians. Indians, on the other hand, cannot hunt animals with guns and snowmobiles or cut down forests for profit and still be "real" Indians.

Throughout NMAI's three galleries and twenty-four exhibits, we see the work of many *real* Indians, who share information about their relationship to the natural world. Exhibit panels inform the viewer how ecologically minded Indians have been and continue to be: "Corn is Life" (Santa Clara Pueblo, Our Universes); "Every time the elders talk, they tell us we were given responsibility to look after Mother Earth. That's our job, the Anishinaabe people." (Anishinaabe, Our Universes); "The Creator put us on this landscape to be just that—stewards of the land" (Yakima, Our Lives); "the environment tells us who we are. Protecting the environment is essential to preserving our lands for future generations" (Kumeyaay, Our Lives).

The NMAI clearly promotes the idea that Native American cultures are place-based cultures. For most Indian people, it is more important to know *where* you are from than *what* you do for a living. What places are a part of your creation stories? Where is your heart of the world? Interestingly, the unit of place-based tribal identification has changed and continues to move, depending on several factors. For some Native people it has shifted from tribal territory to the nation, the tribe, the reservation, and, today, the casino.

Native places are defined geographic places with fluid boundaries and sometimes overlapping territories. Even if a particular Native nation was or is more nomadic, they intimately know their places of migration, as is clearly illustrated in the Tohono O'Odham Nation's exhibit in the Our Peoples gallery. As linguist Keith Basso has stated, "wisdom sits in places." Yet Native peoples have been displaced, dislocated, and forcibly relocated by colonial forces since the 1500s. How place-based cultures continue to have ties to their homelands after being displaced

is an important and weighty question. What has this loss of place meant to different Indian peoples and how is NMAI addressing this issue?

Over the centuries of colonization, it has been extremely difficult for Native peoples to maintain connections to their native places. The U.S. government and its various agencies of land control (the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and other "public" land managers like the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' contested control of Indian reservations) and private landowners (individuals, families, corporations) have taken 93 percent of U.S. lands, leaving less than 7 percent in Indian hands. This epic land loss has had enormous negative consequences for Indian peoples, primarily through the "disease of displacement."

One of the most infamous displacements in U.S. history was the forced relocation of the Cherokee nation, commonly called the Trail of Tears. In the *Our Lives* gallery, the Cherokee exhibit has one panel that discusses this relocation. The panel emphasizes the large Cherokee protest of the Treaty of New Echota, which was signed by only a handful of unendorsed Cherokee leaders. Cherokee curators obviously wanted to highlight this very important historical point. But there is no information in the exhibit about the socioeconomic and psychospiritual impacts of this massive dislocation, which is a missed opportunity to share the significance of this "erasure of place" and how it leads to the erasure of culture and identity in a cascade of negative impacts on, health, economy, leadership, and religious practice.

The two California Indian exhibits, the Hupa Nation in *Our Universes* gallery and the Campo Kumeyaay Nation in the *Our Lives* gallery both discuss the changing relationship they have with their lands due to government policies and practices. They describe the ways their ancestors took care of the land and how they continue to do so today. The Hupa face challenges such as river dams, water pollution, and pesticide spraying, and the Campo band of Kumeyaay face the bifurcation of their traditional lands by the U.S.–Mexico border and loss of oak trees and clean water. The Hupa and the Kumeyaay, representing northern and southern California respectively, share their connection to the environment by telling us that they were both traditionally acorn cultures. We are told that the Hupa's name for themselves means "acorn-eater" and that the Campo band of Kumeyaay named their new casino *The Golden Acorn* because, for them, it is the "new acorn" that drives their economy. As Campo tribal member Jane Salazar expresses it, "I think that, symbolically, this [the casino] was the new acorn, was a different resource for the tribe, like the old acorns were a resource. So that's how the Golden Acorn was chosen."<sup>30</sup> The Campo Kumeyaay may have lost many of their oak groves to agriculture and development, but their cultural connection to the acorn persists, even in what many may think is an abstract or superficial way. In the film shown in

the Hupa exhibit, Mervin George Jr. tells us that there have been major disruptions to the traditional cultural life of the Hupa, mainly because their life blood, the Trinity and Klamath Rivers, have been dammed and are controlled by the Bureau of Reclamation rather than by the natural flows of the water cycle. "Because the river is not allowed to do what Mother Nature intended it to do, we are forced to work with the Bureau of Reclamation to continue our culture."

I liked these examples of how aspects of traditional culture have persisted, even symbolically, in postIndian times and would like to see more examples of these ecological-economic shifts at the NMAI. It is sadly unjust that today most Indian nations have to work through government agencies to connect with their sacred landscapes to perform their "place-making" ceremonies. So much has been lost. Yet there are certainly things that people can do to change or ameliorate the barriers that have been erected. I hope that future NMAI exhibits will have a more proactive stance in terms of educating people on how to protect and restore Native American sacred lands and the place-making cultural traditions (religious rights) associated with them.

In the middle of February, it was difficult to fully experience the Native landscaping outside, designed by Navajo botanist Donna House, but the four created habitats, the forest to the north (red maple, white oak), cropland to the south ("three sisters" waffle garden), wetland to the east (wild rice, silky willow), and meadow to the southwest (panic grass, sunflowers) were all discernable in their winter dormancy. This attention to the local, native plant communities and ecotypes is a special added feature to the museum. By integrating the outside natural world with the curvilinear architecture of the museum, the creators of this space succeeded in developing a truly grounded, living Native community.

## CONCLUSION

Since the 1960s, Indian urban centers have emerged as significant sites of place making, community, and healing. Today, thanks in part to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and gaming revenues, there are more Native museums and cultural centers. These urban places of survivance are new territories for postIndian identity, spiritual support, and creative imagination. The NMAI is one of these significant new territories, like the fresh earth put on Turtle's back in many of the northeastern creation stories. It is filled with newness, creativity, and possibility.

This museum was directed by indigenous leaders who wanted to create a new type of Native place to share a sample of the diversity and richness of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. They accomplished this by highlighting "self-told histories" and validating traditional knowledge systems and practices, past and present. There was also a careful

articulating of various survivance strategies that continue to evolve. The NMAI has demonstrated itself as an important new site of intellectual and historical decolonization through the use of trickster discourse and Native place making for the Native American peoples. I commend the place makers of the NMAI for truly honoring the Native epistemologies of each of the twenty-four featured nations and for designing an educational experience of multiple visions and epistemological plurality. The NMAI successfully disrupts the usual colonial story and subsumes the conquerors' authoritative (white, male, English-language, third-person, analytical-narrative, past-tense) voice with a tapestry of Native (Indian, male, female, child, in diverse native languages, first-person, personal-narrative, in a fluid timeframe) voices that represent an authentic, subjective authority rarely seen in museums.

Visitors to the NMAI need to learn about survivance and about all of the unique and sophisticated knowledge, stories, and information shared there. But people also need to understand that land loss, genocide, and dislocation created trauma and pain that continues to be felt by Indian communities today. This message is clear to the museum's Native audience (it was for me), but it will not be clear for a non-Native audience. Is this important? How does a museum honestly show the pain, sorrow, and trauma caused by the Indian Wars, massacres, diseases, dislocations, land loss, and institutionalized racism without making the Indian appear as a helpless, tragic victim? Will the non-Native viewer resort to default mode and assume this stereotype anyway? Because this question is so complex and difficult to answer, the NMAI emphasizes the importance of survivance and "mixes things up." The negative effects of the storm of colonization are there. Raven weaves them in most of the exhibits, but they are not the things that non-Native visitors will leave with.

In the *Our Lives* gallery there is a panel that emphasizes a rare aspect of Native place: "Native space is land—and something more. Native space is a way of feeling, thinking, and acting. Even away from our ancestral lands, we carry our native space within us." I wholeheartedly feel that this spiritual assertion is true. Yet understanding the history of U.S. Native land loss is absolutely critical to understanding Indian peoples today. Moving through the NMAI, I embraced my own inner tension between, on the one hand, being proud to celebrate postIndian survivance and creative adaptation and, on the other hand, feeling a sense of a missed opportunity to seek justice, to expose the truth of the American holocaust. I hope that future exhibits will expand on and more directly discuss the powerful socioeconomic and psycho-spiritual impacts of forced relocation, expropriation of Native lands, and exhibit how Indians today maintain their diverse and complex ties to specific ancestral places.

- 1 According to logical positivism, logical reasoning and empirical experience are the only two valid sources of knowledge.
- 2 Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); see Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization," *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 139–74.
- 3 Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places," 140.
- 4 Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind—Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology* (London: Zed Books, 1993).
- 5 I first discussed the term "disease of displacement" with Dr. Laurie Monti, assistant professor of forestry, biodiversity, and human health at Northern Arizona University, in September 2003 at the Headlands Center in Sausalito, California. I have since published the article "Introduction: Indigenous Language Revitalization" (*ReVision* 25 [2002]: 3–4.) referring to the term and its relation to language shift. The term is also widely used in the Native American mental health field. The term "erasure of place" is widely used in Arturo Escobar, "Culture Sits in Places," and in Tirso Gonzales's "Sense of Place and Indigenous Peoples' Conservation in the Americas" (unpublished manuscript).
- 6 See Gerald Vizenor's various writings, including "Trickster Discourse," *American Indian Quarterly* 14 (1990): 277–88, and *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994). See also works about him, including Kimberly Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
- 7 *Native Universe: Voices of Indian America*, edited by Gerald McMaster and Clifford Trafzer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2004), 29.
- 8 Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, 6.
- 9 Interviews conducted in front of the Body and Soul exhibit by Clay Dumont at the National Museum of the American Indian on February 19, 2005.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Greg Cajete, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (Durango, Colo.: Kivaki Press, 1994).
- 12 See Oren Lyons, John Mohawk, Vine Deloria Jr., et al., eds., *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Clear Light Publishers, 1992).
- 13 See Bill McKibben's, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
- 14 Paula Gunn Allen, "Problems in Teaching Silko's *Ceremony*," in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 56.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Colin G. Calloway, "The Ecological Indian: Myth and History," *Natural History*, 108, no. 8 (October 1999): 64.
- 17 I wish I had space to go into all of my own definitions of these terms, but it is not a priority for the overall purpose of this paper.
- 18 Two of the best books to address this issue in a more extensive, fair way are Shepard Krech III's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*

- (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999) and Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner, 1995). Deloria's radically exciting book provides numerous Native perspectives on this issue of the Ecological Indian.
- 19 Educational panel in Anishinaabe exhibit in the Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World gallery of the NMAI.
  - 20 John Grim, "Introduction to Indigenous Traditions," Forum on Religion and Ecology (2004), <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/indigenous/index.html>.
  - 21 See John Grim, ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
  - 22 See Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* (Philadelphia Taylor and Francis, 1999); Virginia Nazarea, ed. *Ethnoecology: Situated Knowledge/Located Lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); Benjamin Orlove, J. Chiang, M. Cane, "Ethnoclimatology in the Andes:" *American Scientist* 90, no. 5 (2002): 428–35; Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Clear Light Publishers 2000), David Egan and Evelyn Howell, *The Historical Ecology Handbook: A Restorationist's Guide to Reference Ecosystems/The Science and Practice of Ecological Restoration* (Covelo, Calif.: Island Press, 2005).
  - 23 Some prominent national and international organizations include Cultural Survival, Indigenous Environmental Network, Cultural Conservancy, Terralingua, Native American Lands Conservancy, and the Aboriginal Mapping Project.
  - 24 Joseph Spaeder and Harvey Feit, eds., "Co-management and Indigenous Communities: Barriers and Bridges to Decentralized Resource Management," *Anthropologica* 47 (2005): 147–289; Stanley Stevens, *Conservation through Cultural Survival: Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas* (Covelo, Calif.: Island Press, 1997); Gary Nabhan, *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint Press, 1997).
  - 25 See Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian–Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); Sam D. Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
  - 26 Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies*, 82.
  - 27 Diana Muir, "National Myth of the American Indian," The Claremont Institute, <http://www.claremont.org/writings/050302muir.html> (posted March 4, 2005).
  - 28 Opening panel to Our Universes gallery.
  - 29 Luisa Maffi, *On Biocultural Diversity: Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).
  - 30 Jane Salazar, quoted from the "Golden Acorn Casino" film in the Campo Band of Kumeyaay exhibit in the Our Lives gallery.