

**Exhibiting Difference at the Smithsonian Institution's  
National Museum of American History:**

Examining the *Many Voices, One Nation* Exhibition  
(permanent exhibition, launched 28 June 2017)

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PhD Thesis

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December 2021

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my supervisor, Richard Smith, and to my earlier supervisor, Sara Ahmed, who provided me with support and attention throughout this project. Perhaps most importantly, they offered kindness and humanity as I traversed a process in which neither is a given. I am grateful for the vital lessons in self-care that they interwove into their supervision of my work, and for the example of mentorship and guidance that they have given me.

My mother, Lauren Brown, unwaveringly supported me in the completion of this project and continued to believe it was possible, even when circumstances seemed to suggest otherwise. This thesis would simply not have been completed without her love and assistance. My son, Xavier, has been a patient and generous presence throughout this process, and has kept me buoyantly moving forward with his pithy sense of humor, joyfulness, and inquisitive spirit. Thank you to Shayna Robinson, who arrived with speculative love just in time to celebrate this accomplishment and to help me carry it over the finish line.

My friends and colleagues in Washington, D.C., Montreal, London, and elsewhere, gave me the confidence, intellectual community, and resources to see this project through to the end, and have been stalwart cheerleaders when I have needed them most. Thank you to Kate Crawford, Maggie Debelius, David Ebenbach, Marianne Fillion, Rachel Gartner, Pascale Graham, Sharlene Khan, Natalie Kouri-Towe, Edward Maloney, Ijeoma Njaka, Arelis Palacios, Judith Pérez-Caro, You-me Park, Amanda Phillips, Joselyn Schultz Lewis, Sabrina Stea, Amy Wajda, and so many others whose generosity and encouragement have been essential.

Thank you also to Lillian S. Robinson, who would be proud to see where the fire she helped light has guided me.

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of national history museums in mediating messages about national identity, social difference, belonging, and citizenship. Using the historical survey exhibit *Many Voices, One Nation* that opened in 2017 as a case study, it provides an investigation of the role of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the National Museum of American History more specifically, in shaping national narratives of belonging as they relate to the national past, present, and future envisaged by the exhibit. As a vehicle for examining these functions, the thesis follows the trajectory of the exhibit by exploring the exhibitional and narrative strategies employed in each of its sections, and considers these alongside the correlating chapters in the exhibit anthology, published by the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press.

As two distinct but connected registers of the exhibit, the physical display and the anthology provide the basis for a comparison of the methods employed in narrativizing the exhibit objects for different audiences. In analyzing the physical exhibit and anthology against the backdrop of the history of the modern museum in the United States, the thesis works within the fraught past of object collection and display, and considers the impact of movements for restorative museological justice on the work of the Smithsonian Institution. In doing so, the thesis considers how the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit contends with the violence of settler-colonialism, chattel slavery, and

white supremacist immigration policies, in recounting the past, and how these accounts culminate in perceptions of national futurity that attempt to sever their relationship to these structures. The thesis conceptualizes museum temporalities as intimately connected to the speculative work of producing national narratives, and argues that the exhibitional space is a consequential site of intervention in the design and building of liberatory futures.

**Keywords:** Museum, national identity, settler-colonialism, repatriation, decoloniality, exhibition, race, futurity

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

<b>Through the eyes of the nation</b>	<b>9</b>
The National Mall as Commemorative Topography	12
Museums and Memory	14
Research Objects, Research Fields	19
Discordant Readings	24
Research Questions	30
Structure of the Thesis	31
Structure of the Exhibit	34

### Chapter One

<b>Imperialism and the Emergence of the Modern Museum</b>	<b>43</b>
Zones of Contact: Museums and Objects in Postcoloniality	49
Sovereignty and Redress in Museums	53
Assimilation and Difference in the American Museum	58
Representing Others: Ressemblance and Differentiation in Museological Practice	65
Public Recollection and Identity in National Museums	72

### Chapter Two

<b>Encountering Exhibits</b>	<b>76</b>
Studying the Many Voices, One Nation Exhibit	78
Autoethnography as Process and Method	83
Discourse Analysis in Museums	87
New Museology, New Methodologies	89
Gathering Data	92
Collection, Narration, Display	96
Exhibiting Difference	102

### Chapter Three

<b>Against History: Establishing the National Museum of American History</b>	<b>105</b>
Remembrance as Texture	109
A Nation Outside of History	113
Museums as National Curriculum	127

### Chapter Four

<b>Telling One Nation's Story</b>	<b>135</b>
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A story beginning in 1492	140
Whose objects? Whose collections?	145
Spanish New Mexico	152
Dutch New Amsterdam	154
British South Carolina and British Pennsylvania	155
Metissage and Cultural Exchange	158
Voice and Narrative in the Display of Indigenous Objects	164
Globalizing American History	174
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>American Expansionism and the Crystallization of Whiteness</b>	<b>186</b>
White Settlement and Indigenous Removal	189
Inscribing Whiteness into the National Narrative	192
Displacement, Migration and National Singularity	203
European Immigration to the Midwest	204
Black Migration to the Mississippi Valley	211
Westward Expansion	219
Extra-Continental Expansion	225
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
<b>Visualizing the Future in Historical Accounts of Race and Community</b>	<b>229</b>
Exploring Futurity in Historical Museum Exhibits	230
Race and Chicago's Concentric Design	234
Whiteness and Assimilation in Los Angeles	239
Narratives of Urbanization in America	243
Internal (Im)migration and Domestic Terrorism	248
Strategies of Replacement and the Language of New Arrival	258
Futurity, Nativeness and White Crisis	262
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	
<b>White Hospitality: Representing Migration in Contemporary America</b>	<b>269</b>
Post-racialism and Whiteness in America	271
Conflict and Hybridity	277
Documentation as Weapon, Policing as Nation-building	286
Deathscapes and the Politics of Living	295
Black Absence and Futures of Color	299
<b>Conclusion</b>	
<b>Representing Diverse Futures</b>	<b>303</b>

Museum Temporalities	306
Museum Futures	313
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>316</b>
<b>Works cited</b>	<b>317</b>



## **Introduction**

### **Through the eyes of the nation**

At its inception, my project began with a memory of a school field trip that I took with my fifth-grade class to the Canadian Museum of Civilizations, now called the Canadian Museum of History. I remember the shape and color of the building: undulating, white, and unlike any I had ever seen. Inside, I remember the row of gigantic totem poles in the Grand Hall that towered to the ceiling of the large, light-filled room. In the center of the Grand Hall was a huge, white sculpture of a canoe filled with people and animals. I remember that the edges of the oars cut off at the floor, giving the impression of movement to the canoe and its passengers. Although this memory is a personal one, it references a collective experience of ritual, an experience replicated for countless children in Canada, and for countless more at national museums across the world. Even at 11, I had become fluent enough in the language of museum display to grasp the logic of the exhibit. There was a message I was meant to absorb about being “Canadian”, about being a child growing up in Canada. Temporality was a central feature of these messages about Canadian identity. Embedded in the messages about Canadian identity were clear categorizations of objects as belonging to the realms of either the past or the present. Certain things, people, and worlds had been here and constituted the nation’s past, while other people, objects and worlds had since replaced them.

As a child attending public school in Quebec, my *sciences humaines* classes had taught me about the categories of past and present, and perhaps most crucially, how these categories allowed us to imagine and speak about the future. The past had been Indigenous, I learned, and through images of Jacques Cartier receiving birch bark infusions from the Iroquois to cure scurvy, I was taught that the First Nations people had welcomed the French to their land. If there had been conflict, it had been fleeting. If there had been reluctance among the Indigenous people to relinquish the land, it had been assuaged with payments of guns and metal tools. If any First Nations people were left, they only emerged to dance in parades on Canada Day or on the feast of Saint Jean Baptiste. Sometimes, school field trips to recreated Indigenous villages would afford us glimpses into what life was like in that distant past. Always, those who greeted us at these venues were white. The present was one that belonged to the descendants of the founders of *Nouvelle France*. This was a land that had been worked, claimed, built up and improved. This was a land that was “ours”. An imagined “we” and our world were invited to constitute the present.

The first 11 years of my life had taught me that insiderness and outsidersness were central organizing principles in the world, and that one could move or be moved from one category to the other through things as monumental as a passport, or as slight as a mispronounced word. At the end of our visit to the Museum of Civilizations, I eagerly pinned a small Canadian flag that we had been given to my school bag, along with my classmates. Belonging was a proposal put forth by that visit to the nation’s capital city and its museum; a thing we could consume, wear, participate in. This visit to

the Museum of Civilizations was one of my earliest memories of learning to see through the eyes of the nation.

How do we learn to associate ourselves with the nation? Why are national museums, especially national history museums, often pivotal in inculcating this sense of association in us? In his research on the disciplinary project of the modern museum, Tony Bennett has described exhibitions as constituting “object lessons in power” (63). Indeed, museum objects, exhibit narratives, and even the buildings that house museums themselves consolidate an impression of authority and ahistoricity that provide the contours of national identity to museum visitors. Through national history museums, we are given a timeline punctuated by objects that provide material evidence for the narratives we encounter about the past. These narratives about the past in turn shape our capacity to see what the national future might be.

The most striking aspect of the memory, as I consider it now, is that it was possible for me to visit a museum about Canadian history without having to think of Canada as a nation established as a colony (or set of colonies); as a place that was already inhabited, whose establishment depended on the displacement of those who lived here before. This is not to say that accounts of Canada’s colonial project were not at all present in certain elements of the museum - I suspect that they were - but rather that I was able to internalize a message about Canadian identity that overlooked the violence of this history. As a child, there was very little about myself that I understood enough to be able to grasp my place in the story I encountered, but the ideological force of the museum was nonetheless impactful. I did not know then how to ask questions

about where my own story might intersect or dislodge the one I was presented with, but I was compelled by the rhetorical force of national belonging. So much about what continues to fascinate me about national museums is precisely how they bring certain elements of the national mythology into the scope of what is knowable and desirable, and how they may cause other elements to fade from view almost entirely.

### **The National Mall as Commemorative Topography**

As the monumental core of the United States, the National Mall, along with its collection of national museums, forms an ideal terrain for exploring the relationship between national museums and the manufacturing and reproduction of national histories. The National Mall, together with the network of national museums located on its grounds, provides the setting for an exploration of a museum within a museological landscape. With a focus on the National Museum of American History, this project is positioned to consider not only the narrative of national identity embedded within the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, but also its connection to the broader project of historicization represented by the National Mall and its intertwined existence with the Smithsonian national museum complex.

In 1791, when French-born architect Pierre Charles L'Enfant looked out over the landscape from which the National Mall would be carved, he would have seen a flat, low-lying, expansive wetland. Surrounded by three waterways at the time, the area was frequently flooded by large puddles and ponds that would appear during periods of heavy rain. This topographically-foreign image of the National Mall points to the extensive human manipulation that was required in order to transform it into the green, ordered landscape that we now know. That this soggy, rain-saturated land could support the architectural mammoths that we most associate with the Mall landscape speaks to the unrelenting ambition of early American

architects and civil engineers, who understood the symbolic power that a commemorative landscape would hold in the national imagination. L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the construction of the National Mall was never realized, though many of its elements influenced the subsequent plans proposed in the 1902 McMillan Plan, which served as the blueprint for the design of the National Mall as we know it today.

The symmetry and balance of the National Mall are the result of a program of topographical manipulation that was designed to showcase specific buildings and monuments, and to direct the eyes and bodies of visitors towards particular objects and spaces. With the Capitol building on one end and the Lincoln memorial on the other, the space's two main axes intersect at a right angle, where each of the four points culminates in the placement of a monument. The central axis that provides a vista from the Capitol Building to the Lincoln Memorial is punctuated by the Washington Monument in the middle, and highlighted by plats of lawn surrounded by a dramatic border of American Elm trees on either side. Each monument answers its counterpart with a kind of dynamic reciprocity that produces an experience of immersion in the visitor; every direction, every angle, every footpath, every tree and grassy area have been laid out to consolidate an impression of order, structure, and authority. Beyond the border of trees, museums are clustered around the perimeter of the Mall, eleven of which are part of the Smithsonian Institution, whose own flagship building - known as the Smithsonian Castle - stands along the Mall's southern edge. The National Mall is therefore both a location for the exhibition of objects and monuments, as well as a display of national identity in its own right.



[Fig. 1: Aerial view of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., showing the Capitol Building and Washington Monument, with the museums of the Smithsonian Institution forming two parallel lines between the two]

## **Museums and Memory**

What is a museum? We might start to attend to this question by considering a dictionary definition, such as the one offered by the Oxford English Dictionary: “A building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.” In *The New Museology*, Peter Vergo (1989) described the purpose of the museum in similar terms, writing that “Museums exist in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve, and display objects” (41). The components listed here are undoubtedly

central to the work of contemporary museums, and yet, the changing theoretical, social and political landscape in which museums are situated invites the question of whether this definition is historical or essential. How and why does our definition of what constitutes a museum change over time? How might our expectations of what a museum should do change alongside this shifting understanding?

The definitions offered above are rather new conceptions of a much older term. Paula Findlen (1989) juxtaposes two early understandings of the word museum, by way of pointing to its contemporary potential and expansive possibilities. The classical etymology of the word encompassed two meanings. The first referred to “a mythological setting inhabited by the nine goddesses of poetry, music and the liberal arts” (60). In this sense, a ‘museum’ referred quite literally to the dwelling place (or places) of the Muses. The term ‘museum’ was also used in reference to the Musaeum of Alexandria, an institution that functioned as a locus for the collection of texts and the pursuit of scholarly inquiry, debate and discovery. In these definitions, the museum takes on several forms, ranging from an outdoor space such as a shrine, garden or mountain, to a specific set of public buildings with an articulated purpose, typically one centered around the activities of collection, preservation and display. Henrietta Lidchi (1997) concludes that these early definitions indicate that “Museums could therefore reconcile curiosity and scholarship, private and public domains, the whimsical and the ordered” (155). In other words, this broad-ranging understanding of the museum is reflective of the variety of museological phenomena that have emerged over the past several

centuries, such as cabinets of curiosity, world fairs, national history museums, zoological parks, and outdoor art installations.

How can historical definitions of the concept of the museum help us understand their role in the present? The birth story of the Muses, those nine deities after whom all museums, in some sense, are named, offers another point of entry into the question of what roles contemporary museums play. Hesiod's *Theogony* notes that the Muses were born to Mnemosyne (Memory) and Zeus (910-920). Although Hesiod himself does not elaborate on the significance of the Muses' mother having been the goddess of memory, many definitions, both old and new, of what constitutes a museum focus on acts of preservation, collection, history and storytelling. Surely, the relationship between the notion of the modern museum is intimately intertwined with the concept of memory, to the extent that we might think of memory as being the mother-concept of the modern museum. James Notopoulos (1938) notes that Mnemosyne's name is invoked by Homer in both the Iliad and the Odyssey, as was customary in the recitation of verse in pre-literate Greece. "It was the poet's task", writes Notopoulos, "to conserve living experiences and transmit them to posterity" (468). The figure of Mnemosyne thus represents the unbreakable connection between memory and representation, between remembrance and narrative. We might tell stories *from* memory: Mnemosyne bestows the gift of memory on the teller. Yet we also tell stories *for* memory: collected narratives come to form memory and shape history. This thesis is therefore concerned with the role of the museum as an institution that is both reflective and generative of collective rituals of remembrance.



From that school trip to the Museum of Civilizations, I can recall the words of a museum guide who offered remarks about the building's architecture. It was designed without corners, the guide said, because it drew inspiration from Indigenous architecture, and the belief that corners are where evil spirits might hide. In their work on universal survey museums, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach have described the architecture, decor and design of museums as creating "rituals of citizenship" (1980). Their understanding of the term ritual is literal: whereas the words 'temple' and 'palace' are often used metaphorically in the description of museums, they suggest that the ritualistic role of museum-going produces specific effects for the visitor: "By performing the ritual of walking through the museum, the visitor is prompted to enact, and thereby internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script" (450). The interpretation of the "architectural script" that I was offered imagined Canada as a nation that encompasses and acknowledges First Nation's indigeneity, rather than suppresses it. The very structure of the museum was designed to invite an impression of a united nation and an uncontested national narrative.

In the first instance, my memory of the museum visit connects to this project by helping to illustrate the centrality of national museums in the production and reproduction of national ideologies of citizenship and belonging. Beyond this, the memory points to a parallelism that exists between the national capitals of Ottawa and Washington D.C., and the sites of the Smithsonian Institution that I consider in this project. The lead architect of the National Museum of the American Indian building, Douglas Cardinal, is the same architect who designed the Canadian Museum of History.

The large canoe sculpture, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, in the Great Hall of the Canadian Museum of History was used to create a bronze cast of the same statue that now sits outside the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. These corresponding elements are telling of how familiarity often appears in the structure and form of national museums, and of how that familiarity can be reproduced, and embedded into the landscape of capital cities. In particular, this parallelism points to the discursive power of national symbols as emblems of national coherence and international presence. While this story ensued from a memory, it has also precipitated memories, creating, under the influence of my research questions, a narrative of my own relationship to this project.



[Fig. 1-2: Original plaster pattern of *Spirit of Haida Gwaii* by Haida artist Bill Reid in the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, Canada; Bronze replica of *Spirit of Haida Gwaii* in front of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C.]



[Fig. 3-4: The Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, Canada. This facility opened in 1989 and was designed by Indigenous architect Douglas Cardinal; The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. This facility, also designed by Douglas Cardinal, opened in 2004]

### **Research Objects, Research Fields**

This project contributes to the body of work that has brought cultural studies into conversation with museum studies. In describing my project in this way, I do not suggest that either cultural studies or museum studies constitute fixed, stable disciplines that can be brought into an encounter with one another, but rather, that each field has allowed overlapping concerns to be approached from new places and new orientations. Rhiannon Mason (2006) notes that museums “materialize values and throw the processes of meaning-making into sharp relief”, and thus are a prime object of study for cultural theorists (17). The intermingling of the two fields has brought about changes of their own, where concepts in cultural theory have been refashioned by museum studies research, and cultural studies has contributed new frameworks to museum studies. Tony Bennett (1992) characterizes cultural studies in terms of a landscape, or field of knowledge, writing that “cultural studies comprises less a specific theoretical and

political tradition or discipline than a gravitational field in which a number of intellectual traditions have found a provisional rendez-vous” (33). What shapes this meeting is not a discrete ‘object’ of study with a static theoretical framework but, in Bennett’s words, an approach to the study of culture that involves “examining cultural practices from the point of view of their entanglement with, and within, relations of power” (23). Over the course of the last three decades, overlaps between museum studies and cultural studies have proliferated, expanding on the scholarly investigations of the signifying practices of museums and the objects that they collect and exhibit. As a “gravitational field” whose theoretical framework allows for the analysis of the intersecting components of power, representation, colonialism and nation, it is no surprise that cultural studies and museum studies have drawn closer to one another over the course of the past three decades.

Cultural studies brings both definition and expansion to the term ‘culture’ in the context of museums. Stuart Hall (1997) described a culture as a signifying practice, connected in turn to value judgements. Under this rubric, culture is understood both as the products of aesthetic practices (e.g. photography, sculpture, dance), but also, more broadly, as a way of life. The deliberate deconstruction of the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture that has shaped the approach of cultural theory to its objects of study has perhaps had the most pointed impact on museum studies, evidenced in new approaches to collection and exhibition. This pluralist approach to theorizing culture has allowed for the simultaneous representation of cultures in a single exhibit space, as opposed to a singular culture positioned to dominate the exhibitional narrative. The

Smithsonian Institution's NMAH contains a multiplicity of examples of this broadened understanding of cultural artifacts, and the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit contains numerous examples of everyday objects that are intentionally resignified as cultural artifacts through their display and interpretation. The theorization of culture as a set of changing values, shared "cultural maps" as Stuart Hall put it, has had the effect of inviting cultural tension into museum displays (18). Indeed, this move away from attempts at seamless agreement between objects in exhibitionary practice has in turn underscored the museum as a site of dispute about what constitutes culture.

Objects arranged in a museum exhibit are involved in the articulation of messages about value and signification, as much as they are involved in the crafting of the exhibitional narrative. As Mason (2006) suggests, the act of putting objects on display also involves the formulation of a message that "says "this is art" or "this is culture"" (17). Many of the debates and controversies surrounding museum exhibits and collection practices that have characterized the last three decades of museum studies have indeed arisen from the tension around these acts of what Mason calls "value-definition" (18). The competing expectations of what museum exhibits should deliver, as well as public understandings of the role of national museums have been deeply impacted by interrogations brought forth by cultural theory, and these debates have impacted the very meanings ascribed to museum objects themselves.

While early applications of cultural theory to the study of museums drew heavily on Saussurean semiotics, the revision of the structuralist derivation of Saussure's approach brought about an influx of poststructural emphasis in museum studies. Susan

Pearce's book *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (1992) stands out as a foundational example of the Saussurean approach to museum studies, one which clearly positioned museum studies as an object of inquiry for cultural studies theorists. The alteration of Saussure's framework prompted an interrogation of the assumption of fixed object-meanings, bringing about theorizations of the shifting value and associations between the signifier and signified; between a museum object and its myriad potential meanings.

The influence of feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory and critical race theory has been substantial in this regard, bringing questions of cultural and social change to bear on our understanding of how museums participate in structures of discursive and representational power. As Timothy Lenoir (1994) points out, this reassessment of Saussurean conceptions of the sign can sound like "reinventing the wheel" when positioned alongside feminist theorizations of visual culture, as studies of gender have been at the forefront of arguing that elements of culture that might appear to function as static signs, in fact operate as surfaces and media, upon and through which meanings can be produced, conveyed and replicated. Indeed, the feminist influence on museum studies can be traced back to Donna Haraway's 1984 critique of the American Museum of Natural History's African Hall, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden", and her subsequent 1989 book *Primate Visions*. Far from indicating that structuralism is meaningless in museum studies, poststructuralist approaches to museum studies have resisted structuralist semiotics that are aimed at "looking for a logic of culture, proposing a structural explanation in terms of systems,

rather than a causal historical account” (Lenoir 123). Attention to the ways in which specific meanings are appended to a museum object over time opens new possibilities for theorizing the interpretive forces at work in museum exhibits.

Crucially, cultural studies has provided a theoretical framework for analyzing museum objects as textual elements or component parts of a narrative. As founding director of New York’s Africa Center (formerly the Museum for African Art) Susan Vogel (1991) points out, “Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them”, meaning that museum objects are typically displayed in contexts that do not bear “even the remotest resemblance to what their makers intended” (191). Henrietta Lidchi (1997) understands this process in terms of the “poetics of exhibiting”, that is, “the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition” (168). The poetics of museum display foregrounds the question of reading, specifically asking whether and how a preferred reading is established in the exhibit, how themes are introduced, how the elements of change, continuity and authenticity are represented, and how objects are assembled as signposts within the narrative structure of the exhibit. As Lidchi points out, exhibitions are often where the “creation of meaning” occurs most explicitly in museums (168). Exhibits are therefore the loci in which the creation of meaning is most acutely focussed in museums, which informs my decision to situate them as the central objects of inquiry for this research project.

Exhibitions, though composed of discrete objects, are events in and of themselves, where individual parts are ordered and positioned with a view to creating a

specific meaning. Tony Bennett (1995) describes the narrative power of the exhibit space in terms of “organized walking” in which museum-goers encounter sequences designed to link particular objects and events to one another (179). Speaking of natural history museums, Bennett suggests that through this process of organized walking, museum-goers move from one sequence of objects to the next, each one presented as though it was the logical and unavoidable consequence of what came before it (180). Although the order and evolution of objects in an exhibit impact the exhibit’s meaning, critiques of exhibitional practice often arise out of the disconnect between intended and unintended interpretations. Stuart Hall (1992) has described the impact of cultural studies as having led to the “expansion of the notion of text and textuality, both as a source of meaning, and as that which escapes and postpones meaning” (283). As texts, exhibits evoke meanings that extend beyond the intended reading of the curators, and as such, can give voice to the interpretive dissonance that has characterized many recent critiques of exhibitional practice.

### **Discordant Readings**

The very discord around the attribution of meanings in the exhibit space has been the locus of powerful critiques mounted not only against museological institutions, but against the social and political values that they embody and reproduce. The 1992-1993 performance piece *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña demonstrated the potential of the museum as a venue for the collision of discordant meanings. The variance of the



audience reactions, ranging from amusement and delight to horror, disgust and outrage, was captured on film as the piece traveled to eight museums across the United States and Europe. The 1993 film documenting the audience reactions combines footage from the performances with historic footage of human zoos and exhibits from ethnographic museums. Here, the significance of the museum space itself was crucial to the performance: had the piece been relegated to spaces reserved for theater and performance art, the meaning and intervention would have been quite different. The culminating performance of the piece took place at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, marking the only instance in which the piece was explicitly contextualized as a piece of performance art. The initial seven museum performances leveraged the museum space as a central component of the piece, dredging up the range of audience responses, and pulling them into the intervention of the performance itself. *The Couple in a Cage* exemplifies the potency of museum exhibits in showcasing contested and contestable objects and narratives, and highlights the possibility that museums can both embody and critique dominant narratives at one and the same time.

The theorization of museum objects and spaces as polysemic has further called into question the written texts that accompany museum objects on display. Here, a further blurring of distinctions occurs, not only surrounding what constitutes an object worthy of display, but surrounding the textual component of the exhibition as part and parcel of the object's meaning. Helen Coxall (1996) has studied the grammatical elements contained in museum labels, showing how the very language of museum labels can evoke specific interpretations of the objects and histories they describe.

Henrietta Lidchi's (1997) analysis of the case of the display of Comanche, a stuffed horse exhibited at the University of Kansas from 1893 to the 1970s exemplifies this tension. The text accompanying the displayed horse described him as being the "sole survivor" of the Battle of Little Bighorn, a battle which by other accounts marked a victory for the alliance of Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho who defeated the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army in 1876. The debate that surrounded the exhibited horse brought focus to the language of the text, which was eventually re-written with the participation of Indigenous students to reflect competing understandings of the significance of the battle. In particular, the students took issue with the manner in which the display's language functioned to reify the myth that Indigenous North Americans no longer exist, and that their land was rightfully won in battle. The elements of museum display, such as order, textual description, and categorization, together with the correlated activities of collection, categorization and archiving, can thus function to uphold multiple, often conflicting interpretations of museum objects. The display of Comanche exemplifies the ongoing nature of how museum objects are involved in processes of cultural production, and how their significance can be reflective of broader struggles over identity, social difference and belonging. The mere fact of exhibiting an object does not therefore function to stabilize its meaning over time, but rather opens the object to competing processes of meaning-making.

While this thesis investigates representations of social difference and diversity, at the core of the project are also methodological concerns about how the concept of

diversity is and can be researched. A growing body of writing and research on diversity has taken up the term as it relates to a range of social contexts, from higher education (Smith 2009; Williams 2013), to the corporate workplace (Barak 2010 and 2013; Brown 2017; Canas and Sondak 2013; Hays-Thomas 2016; Livermore 2016), to how-to and self-help-style texts (Bucher 2014; Theiderman 2013). In many of these instances, diversity is described in aspirational terms, as something that offers the possibility of improved productivity and better outcomes for businesses, schools and other types of institutions. Alongside this type of aspirational writing, an expanding body of scholarship has taken diversity itself as an important object of inquiry, and interrogates the use and effects of the term as it circulates as an institutional or national aspiration. In some earlier iterations, the term multiculturalism was used more currently as an axis of investigation (Bannerji 2000; Bissoondath 1994; Kymlicka 1995), whereas the terms diversity and inclusion appear frequently in more recent scholarship as these terms have found their way into institutional lexicons (Ahmed 2012; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Matthew et al. 2016; Swan 2010). This project engages with this growing scholarly conversation about diversity as a concept, and draws its perspective from this body of work by looking at how diversity operates and circulates as a concept within museological institutions.

Although this project is concerned with representation and narrative as they take shape in the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, it is also a project that interrogates the role of diversity as an institutional goal, value and characteristic. As a stated aim of the

Smithsonian Institution's Office of Equal Employment and Minority Affairs<sup>1</sup>, "diversity" emerges as a concept that moves through the institution in a variety of spaces, from employment and service providers to exhibit design and collecting. As the national museological complex, the Smithsonian Institution plays a further role as the nation's museum. The Smithsonian articulates an institutional commitment to diversity, while being charged with the collection, preservation and exhibition of the nation's history. How does this stated aim of diversity connect with the institution's role as a national institution? This project is concerned not only with the operationalization of "diversity" as a concept in the exhibits themselves, but also to the ways in which the exhibits might reference, reveal or reflect the institution's relationship to the concept.

On the one hand, the aim of diversification in museum practice is often thought of as *progress*; a way of getting over, or moving past concerns about inequity and injustice. In contrast, critiques of museum practices concerning the exhibition of social difference diversity can also be concerned with *redress*; a way of working to equalize unequal relations of power by attending to the conditions that allow them to persist. Both can be prescriptive, and in their prescriptions can offer helpful insights into the possibilities of museums. My aim is to develop an understanding of what a commitment to diversity means for the Smithsonian Institution, and specifically, what this commitment to diversity accomplishes within the institution's exhibits.

This project takes up the question of the language of social difference both as it shapes the institutional culture of the Smithsonian Institution, but also in terms of how

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<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian Institution Office of Equal Employment and Minority Affairs "About."

this language appears in the exhibitional texts of the three exhibits that I consider. In the introduction to the anthology, “Museums and Multiculturalism”, editors Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp begin with the assertion that “Every museum, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it” (1). Museum studies has been a field in which the politics of display, exhibition and representation have been the locus of vigorous debate. With the 1991 publication of the anthology *Exhibiting Cultures* by the Smithsonian Institution Press, the Smithsonian itself has participated in creating venues in which this debate has taken place, and continues to play a central role in promoting scholarship in the field of museum studies. Still, as an institution that finds itself within (and often at the center) of museological debates about the ethics of representation, the Smithsonian Institution must navigate the lexicon of diversity in its exhibits, sometimes with slippery consequences. The title of the anthology itself, with its oblique reference to social difference with the word “cultures”, is certainly reflective of this tricky engagement with the language of difference.

## **Research Questions**

This project begins by asking how national history museums mediate messages about national identity and belonging. More specifically, this thesis investigates the ways in which narratives of the past are naturalized using present-day points of reference, and how these narratives can shape, constrain and enable certain aspirations or anxieties about the future. Specifically, I ask how social difference is conceived of,

represented and hierarchized through the exhibit narrative. I consider the context of settler colonialism as a starting point for understanding the development of museological practice in the United States, and use the concept of settler-time as a way of asking how temporality intersects with accounts of colonialism and racism in the American national mythology. Through a close reading of the physical exhibit and the corresponding exhibit anthology, I explore how the themes of national unity, ambivalence towards the past and infatuation with the concept of progress function in the exhibit narrative, and how these elements support the idea of whiteness as a national characteristic of the United States. Finally, I turn to the question of the future, and ask how these themes shape conceptions of national hospitality, and anxieties about the instability of American whiteness in various imagined futures.

As two very different texts, the physical exhibit and the anthology produce a range of effects, messages and arguments. Often, these two registers of the exhibit are at odds with one another, and my reading of each alongside the other aims to surface the points of overlap and divergence, and to ask what readings are made possible through each medium. Crucially, the form of each assumes different audiences, and while reception is not the central axis of inquiry for this project, my analysis of the different registers of the exhibit questions the presupposed forms of engagement that different audiences might have. I ask whether the two formats of the exhibit uphold a dichotomy in which the idea of historiographic consensus in the physical exhibit is reified, while historical criticism and counter narratives are relegated to the realm of scholarship.

As I developed my reading of the three exhibits that form my case studies, I became increasingly unsettled in my certainty that counter-narratives could not exist inside the national museum complex. My notions of curatorial agency and institutional culture were blurred by some of the objects and exhibitional strategies I encountered as I moved through my analysis of the exhibit and the anthology, leading to the questions that I consider in the final chapter of the thesis: what possibilities exist within the framework of the Smithsonian Institution for the centering of counter-histories and counter-futures? How might the exhibit space become a venue for challenging the “non-performativity” (Ahmed; 2012) of diversity-language? Can the national museum complex nurture and house decolonial spaces within its structure?

### **Structure of the Thesis**

In chapter one, I introduce the theoretical framework that underlies the thesis, as well as the methodology used in the analysis of the exhibit. I explain the confluence of scholarship from cultural studies, critical theory and new museology, and how this convergence supports my research questions. I describe my own approach to the exhibits that I analyze, and situate my perspective in relation to the objects, exhibits and institutions that I study. In analyzing the literature surrounding the establishment of the modern museum, I situate this project in relation to the colonial politics of collection, curation and exhibition, as well as postcolonial critiques of contemporary museological practice.

In chapter two, I offer an overview of the scholarship in museum studies, critical theory, and cultural studies that provides a basis for the project. I further map the trajectory of museum studies scholarship in order to put forward an argument in favor of a cultural studies approach to museum analysis. The review of the literature also aims to identify the breadth of disciplinary approaches to the study of museums that shapes the context in which this project takes shape.

In chapter three, I offer an account of the establishment of the National Museum of American History, by tracing the American relationship to the past, as well as the national infatuation with the future. I argue that a reluctance to engage with the concept of history has coloured the Smithsonian Institution's relationship to historiographic work from its inception, and that this ambivalence continues to exact pressure on the exhibitional possibilities within the museum.

In chapter four, I analyze the first section of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, called "Unsettling the Nation". I begin with the notion of national singularity, and ask how the exhibit forecloses the possibility of Indigenous nationhood through its insistence on the concept of a single nation. I then examine the effects produced by choosing to begin the national narrative in 1492, and how this choice functions to reify the settler narrative, even as the title of this section of the exhibit purports to interrogate it. I trace the narrative of the exhibit's retelling of the early colonial presence in four geographic locations, and I consider how the stories of metissage and cultural negotiation in the physical exhibit and anthology diverge in order to offer different perspectives on object-based exhibitional practice.



In chapter five, I offer an analysis of the second section of the exhibit, called “Out of Many”. I start by exploring the relationship between the concept of Terra Nullius, and how it intersects with the Doctrine of Discovery and the idea of Manifest Destiny. As concepts that shaped and precipitated American expansionism, I ask how they formed the bedrock of the establishment of whiteness as the quintessential characteristic of an American citizen. Through an analysis of the 1790 Census and Naturalization Act, I explore how the strategies of national personification and data visualization were deployed in service of solidifying the new national identity. From westward expansion to the recruitment of European immigrants to settle in the midwestern states via the Homestead Act, I argue that the exhibit showcases the process by which Indigenous peoples were replaced by settlers, whose status as “native-born” Americans was emergent.

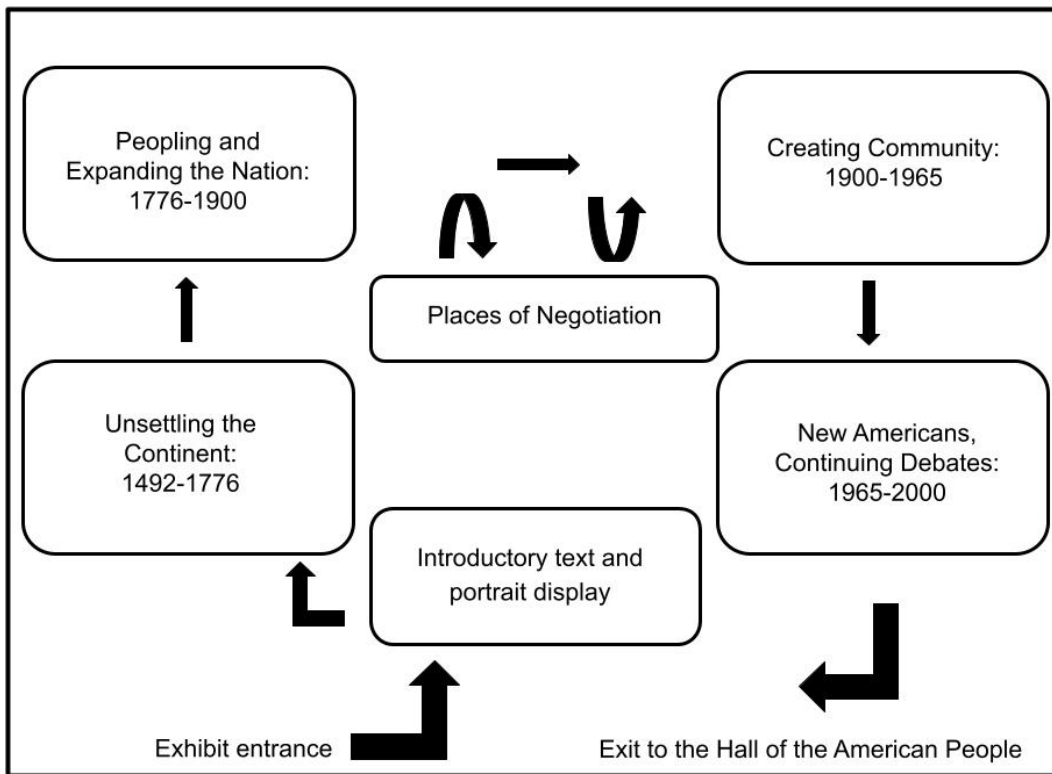
Chapter six analyses the third section of the *Many Voices* exhibit, called “Creating Community”. Through an exploration of the narratives of urbanization offered in the exhibit, I argue that the stories of community formation position white American identity as responding to the arrival of newcomers. I further ask how the exodus of African Americans from the southern United States is situated alongside the narratives of urbanization, and investigate the manner in which national unity again prevails in the exhibit language, even as the fractured nature of the nation is represented at every turn.

Chapter seven considers the final section of the exhibit, called “New Americans, Continuing Debates”. Offering an analysis of contemporary patterns of immigration to the United States, this section calls into question the ideas of entitlement, belonging and

social difference. I ask how the dichotomy of citizen/foreigner established in earlier sections of the exhibit provides the basis for contemporary understandings of who belongs in and to the nation. I further explore the assumptions surrounding national hospitality that are embedded in the representation of cross-border migration between the United States and Mexico. Finally, I analyze the emergence of policing as a form of nation building in the exhibit, and argue that the weaponization of citizenship finds justification in the mobilization of anxieties around threatened whiteness.

### **Structure of the Exhibit**

The physical exhibit is structured chronologically and moves through four main time periods beginning in 1492 and culminating in 2000. The four time periods have names that correspond to the thematic focus taken by the exhibit, and typically comprise two to three display cases of objects drawn from various Smithsonian collections across several museums, in addition to a smaller number of objects on loan from private collections and individual donors. Because of the importance of the experiential aspect of the exhibit in my analysis, the following schema aims to provide a sense of structure and design of the physical exhibit.



[Fig.6: Map of the Many Voices, One Nation exhibit.]

### Exhibit Entrance

The entrance to the exhibit, located in the Hall of the American People, showcases an assemblage of portraits, some of which are static images located next to the exhibit title, behind which changing digital portraits flank the opening question posed by the exhibit: “How did we become US?”.



[Fig. 6: Entrance to the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, located in the Hall of the American People at the NMAH.]

Past the portrait display, the four time periods follow in chronological order. In the overview of the exhibit offered below, I include photographs of the display cases associated with each section. Additional photographs of individual objects contained in the display cases are included in chapters 4 through 7 where the analysis of the object warrants a more detailed view. In some cases, additional photographs in chapters 4 through 7 accompany an in-depth analysis stemming from a text included in the exhibit anthology.

### Section 1: Unsettling the Continent: 1492-1776

Situated at the entrance to the exhibit hall, the first section of the exhibit begins with a sparse display of three objects in individual cases. This initial grouping of objects is remarkable for its sparseness, given the density of the objects collected in the display

cases that form the rest of the exhibit.



[Fig. 7: Display cases grouped under the Unsettling the Continent section. The three initial display cases contain a West African cowrie shell necklace, an iron battle helmet, and a Tsimshian crest hat from Haida Gwaii, formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands.]

## Section 2: Peopling and Expanding the Nation: 1776-1900

The second section of the exhibit combines objects from the early American colonial period, grouped into four sub-sections: Spanish New Mexico, Dutch New Amsterdam, British North Carolina, and British Pennsylvania. A smaller sub-section on New France punctuates this section.



[Fig. 8: Display cases grouped under the 'Peopling and Expanding the Nation' section.]

### Section 3: Creating Community: 1900-1965

The third section of the exhibit investigates the development of the cities of Los Angeles and Chicago, through lenses that blend urban planning, immigration and migration patterns, as well as economic and political forces. In each case, the exhibit brings together objects that relate to the architectural and cultural fabric of the cities as they grew and changed during the first half of the twentieth century.



[Fig 9: Display case with objects related to the development of the city of Chicago.]



[Fig. 10: Display case with objects related to the development of Los Angeles.]

#### Section 4: New Americans, Continuing Debates: 1965-2000

The fourth section of the exhibit is organized around five smaller sub-themes that serve as case studies about the process of migration, assimilation, resistance, and cultural expression as these relate to the latter half of the twentieth century in America.

The sub-themes are The American South, Southwest Borderlands, Transnational Lives, Marching with Liberty, and Heritage in Dress.



[Fig. 11: Display case introducing the 'New Americans, Continuing Debates' section.]





[Fig. 12: Display case featuring objects from the 'Southwest Borderlands' sub-theme of the 'New Americans, Continuing Debates' section.]

Culmination of the Exhibit

At the center of the exhibit space is a display called Places of Negotiation, which offers an overview of the loci of debate and negotiation in the United States. Among the venues explored are schoolrooms, playing fields, courtrooms, places of work, and houses of worship. To the immediate left of the Places of Negotiation section stands a large map of the United States which repeats the theme of unity-in-diversity present in the exhibit's title. The map reads "Out of One, Many" at the top, and invites visitors to press their hands into a thermo-sensitive material to indicate their place of residence on the map as they exit the exhibit.



[Fig. 13: Final display of the exhibit, featuring an interactive surface that invites visitors to create a temporary thermal handprint on a map of the United States.]

## Chapter One

### Imperialism and the Emergence of the Modern Museum

The aim of this research is to situate the Smithsonian museum complex among the media through which ideas about multiculturalism, diversity and history in the United States are articulated. The study of any museum invites us to ask questions about the nature of collection and preservation, the purpose and practice of remembrance and commemoration, and the processes of public exhibition and consumption. National museums further invoke questions about the nature of collective or national memory, and the role of museums in forging and maintaining national identities. Indeed, the controversy surrounding the establishment of the most recent addition to the Smithsonian museum complex, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, has laid bare the entangled issues at the core of debates surrounding American national identity, and have pointed to the vital role that museums play in mediating these conflicts.

The scholarship from which this project draws its theoretical framework is varied, and reflects the breadth of the fields that come into contact with the institution of the museum. American relationships to multiculturalism and melting pot ideologies, together with the increasingly mobilized language of institutional diversity that appears in museum mission statements and articulations of institutional values, represents a central axis of inquiry into the question of museological display. Alongside the question of belonging and national identity, scholarship exploring the relationship of museums to

memory has sought to understand how museums interact with various registers of memory, from individuals and families, to educational institutions and nations.

Although this research project takes the American national museum complex as its primary site of inquiry, the foundational questions of this thesis reach backwards into the colonial past of the United States, and stretch across the Atlantic in order to investigate the emergence of the modern museum in relation to European colonial expansion. The relationship of the modern museum to British colonial expansion in particular forms a critical site of inquiry, given the role that museology in Britain played in establishing a set of blueprints for the creation of museums abroad. The imprint of early British trends around the collection, categorization and display of objects continues to impact debates on the form, content and purpose of museums in the United States and elsewhere.

The rise of the modern museum has coincided with the flourishing of scholarly research on museums, which has proliferated rather dramatically since the 1990s. In her 1992 book, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, sociologist Eileen Hooper-Greenhill describes the lack of museum scholarship until that point as a “blanket of critical silence” under which almost all of the scholarship on museums was written by and for museum professionals themselves (3). Museum scholarship continued to develop over the following decade, and by 2006, Sharon Macdonald proclaimed in her introduction to the reader *A Companion to Museum Studies* that “Museum Studies has come of age (...) It has moved from being an unusual and minority subject into the mainstream” (1). Within the growing body of museum scholarship, critiques of

exhibition, collection and preservation have contributed to the development of a polyphonic field that pushes the boundaries of the political, cultural and ethical considerations involved in contemporary museological scholarship.

Postcolonial analyses of museums have worked to interrogate many of the assumptions embedded in the museological blueprints inherited from colonial projects of collection and exhibition, and this body of scholarship provides a vital counterpoint in the ongoing contest over who and what should be exhibited, and under what circumstances. The interventions included under the umbrella term ‘new museology’, themselves have attempted to take up postcolonial, decolonial and anti-racist critiques in order to imagine a departure from museological pasts that categorized and exhibited people and objects with little attention to consent and collaboration.

As a nation whose establishment was inextricably tied to the processes of British and French imperialism in North America, the United States provides a complex and layered field in which to explore questions of nationhood, concepts of social diversity and belonging as they relate to national museums. Although the site of my research is situated in the United States, its history involves much larger geographical entanglements. Just as the contents of a museum can form a map of colonial acquisition and expansion, so too can the techniques of museum display reveal the histories and trajectories of power, goods and people from one part of the world to another. The conditions under which museums emerge are often difficult to trace, and as Craig Clunas argues, there are challenges inherent to the study of the history of museums, precisely because a museum typically “represents the objects it contains

transparently, in an unmediated form” (44). Researching the history of museums therefore involves uncovering the mediated nature of museum spaces; a mediation which is often invisibilized by the institution’s own investment in an idea of its ahistoricity. Contending with this myth brings several preliminary questions to the fore: why and how are the histories surrounding museums and their acquisitions often obscured? What purpose does this obscuration serve and what effects might it produce? Clunas argues that the museum works hard to evade its historical embeddedness, for if the museum “becomes a historical object in its own right then it can be investigated, challenged, opposed or contradicted” (44). Discourses of museological objectivity can therefore function to divert attention from the histories surrounding museums as socio-cultural phenomena.

As institutions that play central roles in the naming and ordering of national histories, museums provide a particularly rich field in which to study the relationship between imperialism and exhibition. Although more recent controversies around the repatriation of objects held in museums highlight the shifting context in which museums operate, an exploration of scholarship about the emergence of the modern museum in the late 19th century provides a crucial point of departure for the study of the contemporary roles of museums and considers the way in which museums were expressive of the imperial impulse to imagine and represent the worlds of colonial territories through processes of acquisition and technologies of display.

When Germain Bazin described the nineteenth century as the “The Museum Age” in his 1967 book of the same title, he was putting a name not only to the rapid

spread of museums occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also to a change between objects, history and the social world. Although the collection, classification and display of objects was not itself a new set of practices, the proliferation of public museums that occurred during that period brought about a fundamental change in the ways in which objects were collected, preserved and exhibited. Jonah Siegel (2009) describes this change in terms of a move from private collections to public museum displays, a change in which many private collections were donated or loaned by public museological institutions. Siegel describes the reasons behind the proliferation of museums during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as connected to an increased interest in utilizing museums to manage public imagination in the context of emergent political struggles in which increasingly powerful masses created in the ruling classes a “fear of the crowd” (4). At the outset then, Siegel argues that museums were primarily understood as important for their disciplinary potential.

The disciplinary function of museums is the focal point of Tony Bennett’s foundational book *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), in which he argues that museum-goers were invited to participate in a new and promising exhibitional world that afforded them a perspective that appeared all-encompassing and distinctly privileged:

Through object lessons in power - the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display - they sought to allow people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than be known. (119)

Bennett argues that the withdrawal of punishment from the public sphere as described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), coincided with the emergence of the

modern museum that functioned to return elements of a specular disciplinary experience to public life. For Bennett, just as the body was no longer the canvas upon which messages of power were projected through public forms of punishment, the objects exhibited in museums became “vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting messages of power throughout society” (119). Bennett further argues that the power of the exhibitionary complex sought to place museum publics - typically conceived of as a nationalized citizenry - definitively “on the side of power” by affording them a privileged position for the visual consumption of goods, objects, people and worlds (123).

The Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 represented a pivotal moment for Bennett in the development of the exhibitional technologies that structured museums and exhibitions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Characterized as a British response to the earlier series of French exhibitions that began in 1798, the Great Exhibition is described by Bennett as a turning point after which the purpose of exhibitions became essentially centered around dominance and discipline. According to Bennett, The Great Exhibition introduced a key shift in exhibitional practice concerning the principles of classification within which nations and races were organized for display. Bennett argues that The Great Exhibition consisted of superimposition of the logic of industrial progress onto an ordering of peoples and worlds exhibited at the event, resulting in a “progressivist taxonomy for the classification of goods and manufacturing processes that was laminated on to a crudely racist teleological conception of the relations between peoples and races”, in which the display of the host country was meant to represent the culmination of desired cultural and technological achievements



(123). This shift therefore responded to the discursive needs of the imperialist project by positioning Britain at the top of an ascending pyramid of power relations. The consequences of this shift, as described by Bennett, are significant to an interrogation of how the scope of the 'national' operates vis-a-vis the scope of the 'imperial', and how subjects and objects are aligned in relation to each. Bennett argues that the power of the emergent exhibitional complex extended its ideological reach beyond straightforward conceptions of national identity, and instead fostered an identification with the imperial project among exhibit-goers.

### **Zones of Contact: Museums and Objects in Postcoloniality**

The variety of possible approaches to researching museums stems from different understandings of what the museum is, as well as what it does, or ought to do. While semiotic analyses of museums engage the narrative elements of museum spaces, it is impossible to avoid contending with the material nature of the museum as a physical building containing tangible objects. Indeed, despite the more recent developments in online exhibitions and digitization of archives, it is almost impossible to approach the study of museums without thinking about *things*. As Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips (2006) have noted, "colonialism was profoundly material" and "colonized and imperial centers were critically linked by a traffic in objects" (3). Where methodology is concerned, the material nature of the museum must be reconciled with its textual nature. As venues which house, preserve and display objects, museums differ from literary and visual texts in crucial ways. Although a strictly object-oriented approach

might fail to capture the semiological depth of the museum, a textual approach likewise avoids the materiality of the museum. As George Stocking (1985) argues, museums are institutions that are “devoted to the collection, preservation, exhibition, study and interpretation of material objects” and as such are archives of material culture as well as social history (4).

Museums have come under increased scrutiny in the postcolonial era, a scrutiny which has had a generative effect on postcolonial critiques of museums and on museological scholarship more broadly. In his 1997 essay “Museums as Contact Zones”, James Clifford repurposed the term ‘contact zone’ coined by literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt (1991), in order to examine what he saw as the unidirectional nature of relations of power between museums and the cultures and communities exhibited within their walls. For Pratt, the notion of the contact zone was a critical conceptual tool that helped describe the ways in which a dominant culture could create a “negotiated” space into which non-dominant cultures might be invited. The resulting relationship, which Pratt used to describe imperial power dynamics in her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, was profoundly asymmetrical in terms of the relative power enjoyed by different groups within the contact zone. For both Clifford and Pratt, contact zones are understood as reciprocal but unequal sites of cultural exchange, in which the dominant culture and its invited Other dialogue on shared, but disparate terms.

The concept of the contact zone has since become a significant but contested term in museological research, with some scholars arguing that the term involves a

facile recasting of the disciplinary impulses of the nation-state (Bennett 1998), and others taking up the term in order to explore the contemporary museum as a dialogical space of negotiation, interaction and engagement (Macdonald 2002; McCarthy 2007; Witcomb 2002). The term has become synonymous with efforts by contemporary museums to institute policies and practices that privilege collaboration and dialogue between museums and their constituents, particularly those whose cultures and communities form the content of exhibits. Clifford's own understanding of the term reflects its transformative potential: "When museums are seen as contact zones," writes Clifford, "their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* - a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull." (192-3). Indeed, the increase in collaboration-oriented programs and offices in museums (for example, the Office of Strategic Partnerships at the National Museum of African American History and Culture), together with the ongoing controversies surrounding museums, suggests that Clifford's assessment of the "push and pull" of power relations remains an apt framework for theorizing the contemporary museum.

Within the context of what we might think of as the collaborative turn in museological practice, important questions have been raised about the limitations of the 'contact zone' framework, particularly in instances where, as Robin Boast argues, "we perpetuate only a partial and rosy portrait of the contact zone" (57). For Boast, the "neocolonial nature of these contact zones could destroy the very empowerment that it is meant to engender" (56-57). Others have argued in favour of a tentative approach to the celebration of collaborative museological practices, pointing to the complexity

inherent in creating relationships of trust and reciprocity between museums and their collaborating communities (Lynch & Alberti 2010; Schorch 2013). Crucially, others have argued that the role of the public must also be inserted into the conception of the museum as a contact zone. Rhiannon Mason (2006) has showed that constituents beyond the walls of the museum can exert a great deal of force upon the museum itself, even when these constituents may not be seen as collaborators in an official capacity (25). In this sense, Mason argues that there has been a fundamental diversification of the postcolonial museum in which public consumption is positioned alongside museological production as a defining process for museums.

The objects that form the collections held by museums are central to debates about how the postcolonial museum ought to function. Paul Basu (2011) suggests the term “object diaspora” as a way of describing the colonial trajectories of the objects that find themselves among the collections of ethnographic museums worldwide. Basu defines “object diasporas” as constituting objects “whose (material) culture flourishes in exile within the recontextualizing territories of a global museumscape, while their original homelands remain impoverished of a potentially vital cultural resource” (28). As Paul Gilroy (1993) has argued, the concept of diaspora relates to “routes” as much as to “roots”, and requires that we attend to each as we work to unpack the complex and often oppositional forces involved in postcolonial identities. Building on scholarship that explores the relationship of diasporic communities to their dispersed objects (Basu & Coleman 2008; Peffer 2005), diaspora studies provides a critically resistant position in relation to essentialist notions of ‘origin’, ‘native’ and ‘home’. While the transnational

dynamics of object repatriation have characterized much of the discourse surrounding the contemporary ethnographic museum, intra-national concerns have likewise shaped the policy and scholarly landscape for museums in settler nations and imperial centers (King 2002; LaDuke 2005; Lonetree and Cobb 2008). The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian has been at the heart of many of these shifts in museological practice.

### **Sovereignty and Redress in Museums**

As a concept that is intimately connected to the work of museums as institutions that acquire, collect, classify, display, and repatriate, sovereignty emerges as a central yet complicated notion with which to grapple. On the one hand, sovereignty maintains a referential power that inescapably connects it to the colonial projects that brought about the modern national museum. On the other, it has been theorized as a place of potency and reclamation in the struggles of Indigenous communities for recognition, agency, and the ability to make decisions concerning the preservation and care of their cultural resources. The notion of sovereignty therefore arrives in museum studies carrying the weight of this tension, and it begs the question of whether sovereignty can be salvaged or repurposed as a useful concept for theorizing museum justice.

In exploring this tension, Audra Simpson (2020) insists on tracing the history of sovereignty, in order to fully expose and consider its genealogy:

Why speak of such arbitrary power as virtue or “sovereignty” at all when its power is derived from potential lethality? Why do so when it is both an artifact of Western geopolitical and now biopolitical effort, when it is invested clearly and unambiguously in the deep histories of Western

governance that required force, violence, exclusionary practices in the carving of territory? (686)

Simpson further points out that the very concept of sovereignty can be understood as being at odds with decolonial work, given the ways in which it has been used to support colonisation, and to characterize it as politically “just” (686). Despite this fraught history and contradictory meanings, sovereignty remains a powerful concept in decolonial scholarship and organizing, such that “Indigenous peoples now “govern” presumably, with this political form, or aspire to, or are conscripted via (settler) law to use this language of sovereignty and aspire to control of territory, memberships, and jurisdiction” (687). In the context of museums, sovereignty can refer to the right of communities to direct the preservation, curation, use, and display of their cultural objects. The National Museum of the American Indian, established alongside the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, has provided pathways for the creation of new relations between museums and Indigenous communities. These shifts are further explored in chapter two of this dissertation. In addition to collaborative curatorial relationships, NAGPRA established a process that has facilitated the repatriation of hundreds of objects and human remains from museological institutions that receive federal funding. The Smithsonian Institution, and specifically the National Museum of Natural History, has seen the largest affiliation and repatriation of remains than any other institution in the United States (Ousley, Billeck, and Hollinger 2005). In this sense, the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty that forms the basis of

NAGPRA can be understood as an example that encapsulates the promise of sovereignty as a framework, while at the same time confining it to a legislative locus that is deeply colonial in scope.

The understanding of sovereignty as a distinctly colonial concentration of force and violence connects also to the ways in which a national museum contends with the histories of violence that it must represent and discuss in its exhibits. The *Many Voices* exhibit contains many such accounts, prompting the question of how sovereignty as described by Achilles Mbembe is grappled with in the museum. His 2003 article “Necropolitics” offers a framework through which sovereignty can be analyzed as an inherently violent force, present in American history from its earliest to its current formations, and represented in the exhibit in the section on cross-border migration in chapter seven. The interplay of these contradicting uses of sovereignty reveal some of the challenges of appealing to it as a liberatory concept in museum studies, despite the fact that, as Audra Simpson argues, the “significance of “sovereignty” to protect land and relationships is not limited to territory, but to bodily integrity and safety as well” (688). These complex uses of sovereignty are therefore part of the landscape of museum studies both in terms of the preservation and ownership of museum objects, as well as the narrative entanglements within national historical exhibits themselves.

The repatriation of objects taken without the consent of their communities of origin (or under conditions that made genuine consent impossible or unlikely) forms the

kernel of debates around the return of objects and human remains housed in museums across the globe. The specificities of museums in settler nations have been the focus of a branch of postcolonial museum critique which has looked at museological relations in New Zealand (McCarthy 2007; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), Australia (Fox 1992; Healy 1997), South Africa (Coombes 2003; Hall 1995) and Canada (Phillips 2015; Wrightson 2017). In the American context, the establishment of the National Museum of the American Indian precipitated the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, providing a legislative shift in the preservation and return of objects housed in museums receiving federal funding. Since its inception, NAGPRA has become a focal point for many scholars who consider its impact on Indigenous communities and museological institutions in the United States (Chari & Lavallee 2013; Fine-Dare 2002; Trope & Echo-Hawk 2000).

The act of preservation itself can literally impede repatriation, given the abundant use of toxic substances such as arsenic and mercury in the preservation of organic materials. In many instances, remains and objects cannot be returned according to a community's customs because of the environmental and health risks related to handling the materials themselves (Liebmann 2014). The effects of this residual toxicity on a community's ability to receive its objects sometimes results in the creation of an alternate plan for the disposition of the material, even if the plan departs from the community's wishes (Odegaard & Sadongei 2005). The repatriation of certain objects and remains thus requires the invention of new rituals of reception, reburial, and mourning.



While the debate surrounding the repatriation of objects and human remains is symbolically heavy, it is also a debate that underscores the material nature of the museum. Confronted by a vociferous movement lobbying for repatriation, museums have been forced to reevaluate their role in relation to the objects that form their collections. Sven Ouzman (2006) suggests that repatriation debates be foregrounded by the simple question “why conserve?”, and indeed the deteriorative qualities of many museum objects has itself formed the basis for object-oriented scholarship on the question of repatriation. Where museological practice typically operates under the assumption that all preservation is inherently good, or at least benign, Ouzman argues that this approach may forcibly confine objects to Western notions of permanence, history and preservation. Ouzman suggests that although it is “logically only partially possible, it might be interesting to think about objects as having certain rights, as people do” (275). Among these rights might be the rights of objects to decay, to return home, or to die. As a starting point, we might prioritize the “social lives” - to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s (2014) term - of museum objects, in order to reframe discussions of repatriation and explore further the argument that some objects were never meant to last ‘forever’, as standard museological practice would presume. Ouzman argues that:

Foregrounding artifacts as always being in states of transformation, some of which may be called “decay,” should not be positioned as a shock tactic to spur greater conservation efforts, but as a comment on culturally specific understandings of the nature of artifacts, time and being. (270)

The project of preservation - which is inextricably linked to the mission of contemporary museums - is therefore at odds with what might be the desired outcome of a process of repatriation. Orin Starn’s account of the repatriation of the brain of a Yahi man in his

book *Ishi's Brain* (2004) explores the legal, political and cultural trappings that shape the struggle to repatriate people and objects. Neil Brodie (2003) describes the discord at the heart of debates over museum objects as a tension between an “object-centered discourse on ownership” and a view of objects as entities that operate within the social world (8). The study of conservation techniques has also taken up this tension, in order to theorize and develop new processes for collaborative preservation (Drumheller & Kaminitz 1994; Kreps 2008).

### **Assimilation and Difference in the American Museum**

What is now known as the National Mall has been the subject of innumerable conflicts, planning efforts and studies. The National Mall has been awash in struggles about American national identity for centuries, from early actions in support of the abolition of slavery, to ongoing debates about how the land ought to be used by the Smithsonian as plans for new museums are considered. Framed on all sides by government buildings, monuments and museums, the National Mall forms both the literal and figurative nucleus of the American national mythography. It is the central site of the exercise of governmental power, at the same time that it encompasses the representation of that same government in the buildings, monuments, commemorative landscapes and museums that populate it. The Smithsonian Institution, with eleven museums located on the National Mall, plays a key role in defining this site.

Beginning with the establishment of the annual Smithsonian Folklore Festival in 1967, the official narrative of the American national museum complex became one in

which the concept of cultural diversity, in both a national and global sense, was central. Despite this centrality, the concept of social difference has continued to be debated with fervor in public venues across the United States, and museums have been positioned as a key locus of this tension. Lavine and Karp (1991) describe the generalized anxiety around social and cultural difference that characterizes American society, writing that the United States is “debating its 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). Lavine and Karp recognize the privileged position of the museum, concluding that museums can “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). Alongside this hopeful vision of the museum as mediator of social conflict, the imagery of the American “melting pot” continues to pervade discourse on assimilation and the accommodation of difference.

Often pitted against the imagery of the melting pot are the concepts of a mosaic or salad bowl, in which individual elements are combined while retaining some aspects of distinctness. The notion of a melting-pot on the other hand, suggests the breaking-down of individualized elements in order to form a cohesive, homogeneous substance. Further, the very idea of “melting” - to make or become liquid through heat - evokes a deeply violent experience, in which assimilation is the end result of a painful, coercive process. While the United States does not hold an official position on multiculturalism, the concept of the melting pot is deeply embedded in American notions of social and cultural difference (Joppke & Morawska 2003).

As a concept, the melting pot has informed scholarship and cultural production about America's treatment of immigrants for at least a century (Erikson 1975; Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Hirschman 1983; Kennedy 1944; Rogin 1996). The earliest popular use of the 'melting pot' imagery that is now emblematic of American assimilationist logic stems from a 1908 play by the same name, written by playwright Israel Zangwill. Himself a Russian-Jewish immigrant to the United States, Zangwill often represented the immigrant experience in his plays, many of which were bilingual English-Yiddish productions and intended largely for Jewish immigrant audiences in New York City. On the cover of a 1916 program for the play, a crowd of people is depicted, making their way into a steaming cauldron under which a fire burns. The Statue of Liberty towers to the left of the scene, her torch emanating a smoke that suggests that her flame has been extinguished.



[Fig. 5: Cover of theater program from a 1916 production of Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*.]

While the immigrant experience that Zangwill represented was in many ways different than that of the contemporary immigrant experience, the imagery of the melting pot persists as a mechanism through which to represent the process of “Americanization” - a term used as early as 1915 by American philosopher Horace Kallen in his essay “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot”. Coincidentally, 1915 was the

same year that the first proposal was made for an African American museum and memorial on the National Mall, a museum that would take over 100 years to come to fruition. Kallen's essay offers an argument against melting-pot ideology and, although the text has notable gaps on the issues of racism, slavery and colonialism, constitutes one of the earliest formulations in favor of a view of the United States as a nation comprised of distinct groups whose claims to American identity did not rest on their adoption of Anglo-Saxon culture. For Kallen, the right to be different was both inalienable and distinctly American, a view which he further developed in his 1924 book *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*. The tension between melting pot assimilationist thinking on the one hand and a culturally pluralist America on the other, continues to characterize debates about the Smithsonian Institution and its presence on the National Mall.

In her 1997 article "Culture Wars Won and Lost", Smithsonian Institution curator Fath Davis Ruffins situates the proliferation of ethnically-specific museums within the broader history of efforts to represent racial and ethnic difference in the United States. Ruffins suggests that beginning in the 1960s, a growing number of folkloric and cultural festivals began to challenge the notion of "official" American culture, and these developed alongside historical societies, survivor groups and cultural centers that were "devoted to the recovery and celebration of different American ethnic groups" (Ruffins 81). Written in the midst of the heated political debates surrounding the proposal for the NMAAHC, Ruffins asks how the trajectory of certain culturally-specific museums occurs with relatively little political and public resistance (e.g. the National Holocaust

Museum, located near but not on the National Mall), while the establishment of other similar museums garners such controversy. Ruffins describes the polarization of perspectives in which a “distinctive and positive narrative about the American past” was positioned against the view that a monolithic view of American history constitutes an “historical fiction” in and of itself (80).

The proliferation in the 1990s of calls for what Nicole Reiner (2013) terms ‘ethnically-specific museums’ was accompanied by an elevation of anxieties over the distribution of financial resources and space on the Mall. Scholarship on the National Mall has, over the past two decades, turned towards these debates, taking up the questions of ownership, representation, and scarcity in scholarship that engages the discursive context of the site and the (Glazer and Field 2008; Ruffins 1997; Savage 2009 and Walker 2013). While the Smithsonian Institution itself has demonstrated an interest in responding to calls to decolonize the museum by lending support to efforts to establish culturally-specific museums, the political debates surrounding the establishment of the museums indicate that the conflicts surrounding race, immigration and class in the United States continue to be played out in the theater of the Mall.

The 2016 opening of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture marked the culmination of a century-long process that kicked up the dust of conflicts past as much as it energized ever-present struggles over American identity. The establishment of the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as the proposal to establish a National Latino Museum (proposed in 2011 but not ratified as of yet) are

efforts that are connected to attempts at “progressive museum reform” afoot at the Smithsonian and elsewhere (Reiner 34). Yet, as Reiner argues, the 2008 proposal for the establishment of a National Museum of the American People highlights the prevalence of the belief that culturally-specific museums operate against the promotion of a cohesive American national identity. The comments of Senator Jim Moran, a supporter of the National Museum of the American People, speak to the ways in which xenophobic discourse has been transposed onto the issue of the National Mall and its museum. In a public statement regarding the proposal for the Museum of the American People, Senator Moran argued that “the last remaining places on the National Mall are becoming filled with museums that deliver stories of a specific group” and further warned that if the trend continues, “we threaten to make our already heavily concentrated Mall overcrowded, leaving future generations no room to honor their heroes and causes, while severely burdening the Smithsonian’s budget” (quoted in Reiner 36). Nirmal Puwar (2004) has described the manner in which certain spaces are understood as rightfully belonging to particular bodies. By investigating the process through which certain bodies are deemed to be out of place, Puwar argues that whiteness and maleness are presupposed in spaces of power and authority as being in their proper places, while female and racialized bodies are seen as encroaching on the places of those who are understood as entitled to them. The use of the words “overcrowded”, “threaten” and “burdening” in Senator Moran’s comments recall the logic of anti-immigration arguments, while reinforcing the notion that allowing “specific



groups” to occupy more space will somehow cause injury to “future generations” of Americans who will find themselves crowded out of their National Mall.

Critical perspectives on diversity discourse have yielded responses to the way in which institutions position themselves in relation to the question of multiculturalism, honing in on the effects that diversity discourse produces, rather than on the content of the discourse itself (Ahmed 2012; Bannerji 2000; Thobani 2007). The multivocal nature of the Smithsonian Institution, with its wide array of museums, departments, curators, archivists, educators and museum-goers, reveals the tension between multiculturalist ideals and postcolonial critiques. As Sneja Gunew (2004) argues, while postcolonialism tends to deal with “specific historic legacies” in a retroactive fashion, multiculturalism instead involves the “often compromised management of contemporary geopolitical diversity in former capital centers as well as in their ex-colonies” (15). As such, museums in postcoloniality can often become mediators of diversity management: positioned to reimagine social conflict and inequity as a form of benign heterogeneity.

### **Representing Others: Resemblance and Differentiation in Museological Practice**

If reconciling diversity and difference are integral to the idea of American identity, we might ask how difference and display intersect in the museum. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault explores the process of categorization, asking how systems of meaning are created through differentiation. Ultimately, Foucault describes his interrogations as an attempt to uncover a “history of resemblance”, asking “on what conditions was Classical thought able to reflect relations of similarity or equivalence

between things, relations that would provide a foundation and a justification for their words, their classifications, their systems of exchange?" (xxiv). It is through classification, and the representation of the resulting categories, that museum items are given meaning as both individual objects, and as parts forming a cohesive whole. Eugenio Donato's essay "The Museum's Furnace" argues that museums are institutions whose meaning derives not from the ordered histories that they purport to display, but from the taxonomic ordering that they perform with the objects in their collections. The purpose of museums, argues Donato, is derived from their attempts to "erase the heterogeneity of the objects displayed in their cases, and it is only the hypothesis of the possibility of homogenizing the diversity of various artifacts which makes them possible in the first place (221).

Edward Said (1978) looked to literary representations of the colonized subject in order to establish a set of ideas about the relationship between colonialism and modern forms of representation. The ability of literature to create and then confirm ideas about colonial Others, and to reinforce the "boundary notion of East and West", characterized discourse about social difference that pervaded social institutions more broadly (201). Departing from Said's intervention, scholarship on museums has directed critiques of Orientalism at museological practice, and the central role of museums in developing and reproducing knowledge about the colonized Other. Timothy Mitchell, in his 1992 exploration of Egyptology and the development of a colonial museological practice, elaborated on Said's concepts by expanding the range of media encompassed in the development of the "exhibitionary order" that characterized colonialism. For Mitchell, the

idea of the Orient that was consolidated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was reproduced not only in the romantic novels, scholarship and visual artworks of the period, but also in the myriad venues in which representations of the world began to take shape. These included, according to Mitchell, museums and world exhibitions, which were central to the “new apparatus of representation” that emerged in order to display the non-Western world (290). Crucially, these new modes of representation gained increasing importance in the construction of national identity and “imperial purpose” (290). Difference and differentiation have thus always been part of how museums function. Contending with this historical bent towards representing difference, museological practice must now ask whether and how representation is possible outside of the relations of resemblance and dissimilarity that have shaped exhibitionary approaches for so long.

Over the course of the past forty years, museums have grappled with this question in varying ways - a question which emerged as a deliberate interruption of the tenets of museology that came before. In the 1989 anthology *New Museology*, Peter Vergo described this shift as an epistemological one, in which “old” approaches to museum studies saw the field as being one that was primarily concerned with “museum methods”, rather than concerned with the “purposes” of museums (3). The purpose of museums had previously been understood as being inextricably linked to the collection of what Stephen Weil (1990) calls the “material evidence” that reflects its correlating objects in the social world. The collection, preservation and exhibition of objects were the central activities that defined a museum’s purpose. Weil suggests that inattention to

the question of purpose allowed museums to avoid entanglement in questions of representation, focusing instead on the “seemingly value-free” work of collection and display (46). The challenges put to museums took aim at the question of power within museological practice, interrogating the right of museums to represent people and objects without public consultation, collaboration or accountability.

The term new museology, then, marks the entry point of museum studies into the realm of humanistic disciplines, a moment in which museum theory became positioned alongside museum practice as a field of knowledge. Socio-political and scholarly forces precipitated this shift, bringing to light the ways in which museums, as popular media, are venues in which questions of representation, agency and power should be investigated. Julia Harrison (2005) argues that this change also marked an important challenge to the authorial voice of museums, which had previously leveraged the impressive architecture and design of many museum buildings in order to establish themselves as “purveyors of truth” and “cultural authority” (39). The fact that many collections saw their beginnings as private collections established by wealthy individuals bolstered the entrenched relationship between museums and the “authority of tradition” from which they stemmed (39). In the case of ethnographic museums, the troubled trajectories of many of the objects in their holdings further reflected the colonial violence that surrounded their acquisition. The shift in museological practice described as new museology thus brought new attention to museum spaces and objects, as well as to the practices of display used to animate and narrate collections.

What are the consequences of new museology for a methodology of museum analysis? How does the focus on “methods” described above by Vergo impact the manner in which museum studies is carried out? In her 1992 book *Museums, Objects, and Collections*, Susan Pearce describes an approach to postmodern museum studies as beginning with an analysis of the codes and patterns that govern museological praxis. An identification of these codes and patterns allows the researcher to begin with the question of power, which Pearce identifies as central to the project of analysis. Pearce asserts that “...where institutions like museums are concerned, the post-modern project involves admitting firstly that power play is implicit throughout the entire enterprise, past and present, and secondly, that this power operates through the social pattern” (232).

The concept of the ‘social pattern’ referenced by Pearce appears in various forms throughout postmodern theory. Foucault (1972) speaks of a “group of rules” that govern discursive practices, where the rules are not strictly imposed from the outside or from above, but rather exist as elements that are embedded within the very loci in which they operate (224). Similarly, Bourdieu (1977), uses the notion of the “habitus” in order to describe the “structuring of practices and representations” that result from dispositions and experiences accumulated in the body (72). In her 1993 book *Tendencies*, Eve Sedgwick takes up a similar project, theorizing how queer associations and orientations can articulate an existence that is contrapuntal and resistant to monolithic understandings of patterns of living and loving. Each of these articulations invite an approach to museum analysis that in the first instance demands an

epistemological intervention: how do we authenticate knowledge? How do we make associations and interpret patterns from objects assembled in museum exhibits?

Museums are embedded in the workings of the social codes from which they emerge, and, as Pearce puts it, “It is the concreteness of its participation in the code which gives the museum its particular place within that code” (233). Pearce therefore argues that museums should be understood as producers of *ideology*, rather than *knowledge* (233). This distinction has consequences for the manner in which museum analysis is carried out: rather than approaching the assemblage of objects in a given collection or exhibit as evidence of a natural and benign history, an understanding of museums as producers of ideology requires us to ask how the accumulation and classification of a set of objects and texts refers to and reflects (or perhaps events resists) certain social patterns. Crucially, the attention to social patterns, and their often circular process of self-reference and reproduction, also invites us to attend to the instances in which patterns are broken and codes are reimagined. As Amy Lonetree notes in *Decolonizing Museums* (2012), changing approaches and renewed challenges to museum praxis have made possible a measure of “shared authority” over some museum content. Museums, like other types of social institutions, can therefore also be sites of resistant practice and of critical creativity, even amid unequal relations of power.

The potential of museums to be mobilized as agents for their own transformation has been a focus of attempts to operationalize the critiques of new museology. Collaborative approaches to exhibition, especially when connected to diffuse models of museum governance have opened the door to practices both within and beyond exhibits

that challenge established museum practice (Shannon 2009). Museum spaces have been explored as central dialogic venues for engaging with current issues, for example Indigenous land claims and struggles around the repatriation of museum objects (Rand 2009). The role of tribal museums has also emerged as a critical counterpoint to nationalized museum spaces, allowing communities to retain control over how and when objects are displayed, in addition to providing more direct access to the use of objects for ceremonial purposes, with Amy Lonetree's 2012 text *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* offering an overview of tribal museums in North America. The role of alternative museum spaces in carrying out the work of preservation has also been explored, as Indigenous museums and cultural centers grow in number (Bowe chop & Erikson 2005; Simpson 1996). The proliferation of tribal and community museums has also functioned to shift the dynamics of power between larger, national institutions and Indigenous communities. As source communities across the globe develop their own processes and places for housing and preserving their artifacts, the oft-cited argument against repatriation that communities lack the infrastructure and knowledge to care for their own objects no longer holds water (Hoerig 2010). The representational power of museums positions them as arenas of both violence and reconciliation. As Amy Lonetree (2012) concludes, the potential of museums to engage in the work of decolonisation cannot be ignored, and as their transformative capacity is harnessed, museums can "become a means for repairing colonisation's harm" (171).

## **Public Recollection and Identity in National Museums**

The philological connection between the Muses, museums and memory brings forward the central role of memory as a site of inquiry embedded in the study of museums. That the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was the mother of the Muses, points to the central place that representation holds in relation to memory.

Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of memory and its relationship to culture intersect with museum studies in multiple ways. Although memory is now a central concept in a wide range of disciplines, it does not belong entirely to any one field, but rather bridges many seemingly disparate disciplines spanning the humanities, social and natural sciences. Although scholarship on the application of memory studies to museum studies has itself been proliferating, (Crane 2000; Blair, Dickinson & Ott 2010), discordant understandings of memory and its role in shaping collective identities give rise to different approaches to understanding whether and how the concept of 'memory' can be applied to the study of museums. While museums often conjure the notion of 'collective memory', debates within memory studies have questioned this use of the term, turning instead to the underpinnings of memories and inherently individual experiences and expressions.

Although a number of qualifiers are often attached to memory in contemporary scholarship (e.g. collective memory, cultural memory and social memory), museum scholarship tends towards the qualifier "public" when it considers the role played by memory in museum spaces. In this sense, public memory is understood as being mobilized by the conflicts, anxieties and debates of the present moment. As Blair



Dickinson and Ott have argued, groups tend to “talk about some events within their histories more than others, glamorize some individuals more than others, and present some actions and not others as “instructive” for the future” (7). Public memory, then, is a concept in which the elements of choice and agency figure prominently - a key departure from psychoanalytic understandings of the term. David Lowenthal (1985) similarly suggests that we “select, distill, distort and transform the past, accommodating things remembered to the needs of the present” (194). Ultimately, the practices connected to public remembrance reference elements of the past in order to apply them to the present and future.

Several explanations have been offered by way of explaining the contemporary fascination with memory. From identity-related social movements in the United States (Klein 2000), to the second World War (Lacapra 1998), a growing interest in memory has characterized many fields in the humanities. The over-abundance of digital data related to the past, coupled with boundless possibilities for the storage of such data have produced an anxiety of their own. Baxter (1999) argues that the “fetishization of memory” thus emerges as a response to the “information glut” that characterizes our contemporary world. David Shenk (1997) coined the term “data smog” in order to describe the process by which an individual’s ability to process and retain the past is impeded by the very technologies designed to assist them in documenting historical information. Anthropologist Joel Candau’s term “mnémotropisme” further describes this anxiety as “a problem in identity caused by our incapacity to master the anxiety of loss”. Indeed, the concept of memory as it relates to museums is certainly entangled with a

type of anxiety about identity, as exemplified in the heated debates surrounding national museums in the United States and elsewhere.

In their role as collectors and conservationists, Graham Black (2015) suggests that museums operate as a “permanent memory store”, a function in which they construct meanings through the display and interpretation of the material evidence that they house (415). For Black, the experience of the museum goer is crucial to his understanding of how museums relate to memory, as the visitor transforms exhibits into something of their own understanding of the past and how it relates to them - developing their own “historical sense” (415). The proliferation of virtual exhibitions have further expanded the possibilities for how museum objects are encountered, and have pointed to new ways in which museum publics are engaged in constructing relationships with the past. Berliner (2005) considers the proliferation of anthropological studies on and about memory, and suggests that the increase in the term’s use requires us to attend to the specific ways in which its specificity as a term is at risk of dilution. Beyond its increased use as a term, Berliner suggests that there remains a number of uses of ‘memory’ that have yet to be examined, in particular, the question of whether such a thing as collective memory exists, and how we might understand forms of social or group memory as existing alongside individual memory (198). The varied and numerous invocations of the concept of memory are also often tied to notions of identity and culture, suggesting that the mingling of these terms has led to confusion about what is meant by each. Engaging the scholarship on memory studies in analyzing museums

brings to the fore the question of how museums allow the slippage between memory and identity to remain intact.

## Chapter Two

### Encountering Exhibits

This project is situated at the intersection of museum studies, critical theory, and cultural studies, and draws heavily on scholarship from all three fields, as well as on the growing corpus of scholarship that labors at this very intersection. The aim of this research is to investigate the American national museum complex as a consequential medium through which ideas about multiculturalism and diversity in the United States are articulated, and as a site in which narratives of the past function to instill and uphold anxieties about social difference in the American national future. In particular, this project considers how the historicization of nationalized narratives in the Smithsonian take shape at the National Museum of American History's ongoing survey exhibit, *Many Voices, One Nation*. As such, the project also relates to scholarship on nation, national identity, and social difference, and how these elements intersect with historiography. Although the exhibition that forms the case study in this research is contemporary, its analysis serves as a way of situating larger shifts in museological practice that have taken place since the 1970s. These shifts have been both scholarly and applied in scope, shaped by the co-mingling of cultural studies, museum studies, and cultural studies, and have also had practical applications in terms of approaches to museum methods and design. These material arenas are spaces in which the work of reconciling

the new demands of museum publics with the troubled histories of museological practice have taken root.

Although my research questions take the contemporary national museum complex of the United States as their focus, the history of the national museum as an institution and medium begins with the emergence of the modern imperial museum during the nineteenth century, when the acquisition of territories, peoples and objects precipitated the development of new technologies of collection and display. While traces of the museum emerged much earlier around the middle of the fifteenth century, the form and function of the modern museum as an archetypal genre of European cultural expression took shape in tandem with European imperial projects. Much of what constitutes the methodological format of this project thus results from critiques of museums and museology that stem from postcolonial analysis.

Emerging critiques of museum theory and practice that began to take shape during the late 1970s form a meeting place between postcolonial analyses of the modern museum and the demands and inquiries of museum publics. Further, critiques of the uses of social difference in language and visual culture, forming what might be described as critical diversity theory has offered new tools with which to understand the ubiquity of diversity discourse in many institutional contexts. Taken alongside the body of postcolonial critiques of the museum, critical diversity theory helps unpack the instrumentalization of social difference in museum practice. The framework of decoloniality and critiques of the temporal relations established through the historicization of settler-time offers another lens through which to imagine the potential

of museological praxis to reshape time and its possibilities for theorizing the nation and post-nation.

### **Studying the Many Voices, One Nation Exhibit**

My research focuses on the national museum as a social institution that mediates, navigates, and gives voice to a range of competing desires and concerns about the nation, and who comprises it. This thesis explores the politics, promise and limitations of national museums as sites of learning, knowledge production, and contest, in which national museums are understood as mediators of messages about social difference, specifically as these relate to conceptions of national identity and belonging, and of the impact that these conceptions have on the visualization of national pasts, presents and futures. Through a close reading of the permanent survey exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, this thesis provides a case study analysis of museological approaches to mediating social difference and identity as they interact with ideas about American national identity and the historicization of the nation. The focus of this project is the exhibit *Many Voices, One Nation*, which opened at the NMAH in June of 2017, replacing the previous survey exhibit, *Nation of Nations*, which was open from 1976 to 1991.

While this project hones in on a single exhibit, it also draws on the context surrounding it, connects this context to the broader institutional world that encompasses the exhibit, and attends both to the objects it displays as well as to the collections from which those objects are drawn. As Susan Pearce (1992) argues, museums, objects and

collections are the “three faces” that form the cultural triangle created by modern museological institutions. As such, exhibits are shaped by the institutions of which they are a part, the collections from which they pull their objects, and the curators who mediate the relationship between these two venues. The case of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit offers a focused exploration of a short and specific moment in the much longer history of collection and exhibition in the United States, and touches on a sample of the over 240 exhibits currently open in the Smithsonian Institution’s 19 museums, most of which are located in the American capital of Washington, D.C., along the edges of the National Mall.

*Many Voices, One Nation* serves as a point of entry into a broader exploration of material culture and national identity, even though the window it provides into the museological landscape of the United States is specific to a given museum and a discrete moment in time. Robert Sullivan (2004) argues that museums are “moral educators”, who are also agents of social change by virtue of the influence that they exert over the “knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and feelings” of the visitors who interact with their exhibits (257). *Many Voices, One Nation* can therefore be examined through both the triadic lens of institution-collection-object proposed by Susan Pearce (1992), but also as an ethical intervention whose content is partial, intentional and consequential for how we understand the role of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in shaping perspectives on American identity and history.

Having opened in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit was developed during a period of intensified public debate over what

constitutes American national identity. The exhibit brings attention to the questions inherent in asserting an American identity, and about who is perceived as being entitled to belong to the national collectivity, and who is not. Although the ethical and political considerations foregrounded in the exhibit are not new, their manifestation is both timely and reflective of the tensions that surround American national identity. Through the curatorial choices, engagement with the NMAH collection and strategies of display, the exhibit surfaces questions about how we encounter those who are unfamiliar, and about how strangers are variously welcomed, received, overlooked or expelled. The exhibit, and the history of the American state that it offers, also point to the ways in which conditions are placed upon the proximity of those perceived as foreign (Ahmed 2000; Derrida 2000; Thobani 2007). In addition to the question of migration, the exhibit attempts to address the question of how those who were displaced by the nation's establishment might be reimagined as belonging to it, or as being willing participants in the national project (King 2013; LaDuke 2005). The legacy of whiteness as a founding characteristic of the United States is also investigated in the exhibit, both implicitly and explicitly (Berger 2005; Hale 1999; Kendi 2016).

The physical exhibit, located on the second floor of the West Wing of the museum is the primary site of interaction for visitors to the NMAH, who totalled 4.1 million in 2018 (Visitor Stats 2019). In addition to the physical exhibit space, *Many Voices, One Nation* includes an online exhibit experience, an online tour of highlights from the exhibit, and an exhibit anthology with contributions from curatorial staff and scholars. My analysis includes a close reading of the physical exhibit, including objects,



descriptions, and accompanying written material. I contrast the physical exhibit with the exhibit anthology, which brings together a range of scholarly articles that draw on the objects and themes from the physical exhibit. Together, these various registers can offer insight into the role of the Smithsonian museum complex as a consequential institutional mediator of national identity.

The focus on a single exhibit constitutes an intentional choice to examine the interplay of meanings, interpretations, objects, and texts that are part of the internal tensions within the *Many Voices* exhibit. Alongside an analysis of the physical exhibit, this project considers the texts included in the exhibit's companion book, *Many Voices, One Nation: Material Culture Reflections on Race and Migration in the United States*, edited by Margaret Salazar-Porzio, Joan Fragaszy Troyano, and Lauren Safranek. The anthology of texts produced to accompany the exhibit provides an additional register of the exhibit content with which the physical exhibit is contrasted, critiqued and analyzed. While the design, composition, presentation, and organization of the physical exhibit are included in my analysis as important paratextual elements, this project is concerned primarily with investigating the internal incoherence of the exhibit's logic of unity-in-diversity. In her study of the Philippine exhibits at the University of Michigan, Sarita Echavez See (2017) describes the desire of colonial exhibits to obscure the histories that make them possible, such that these exhibits require the "erasure of the history" of their presence (6). In this sense, the *Many Voices* exhibit exists in an impossibly fraught space which requires a balance between multi-vocal sensitivities that allow it to speak from diverse vantage points, and an emphatic Americanness that it is

compelled to articulate by virtue of its position as the historical survey exhibit at the National Museum of American History.

In considering the anthology alongside the physical exhibit, the project explores how the two registers of the exhibit interact with one another. In the first instance, the very title and subtitle of the book, *Many Voices, One Nation: Material Culture Reflections on Race and Migration in the United States*, indicate a focus on social difference that, while alluded to in the exhibit's use of the word "many" in its title, does not figure as an explicit focus of the physical exhibit. Oneness, unity-in-diversity, and the overcoming of differences in order to consolidate a sense of national cohesion are the messages that pervade the physical exhibit, and conflict surrounding social difference is largely presented as a contentious feature of the American past. In oscillating between the anthology and the physical exhibit, questions of audience and narrative come to the fore as areas of discord between the two registers. Throughout the exhibit and book, the anthology emerges as a venue for the exploration of race and migration through a critical lens, in ways that depart from the physical exhibit. Turner (2016) argues that catalogues form a crucial axis of inquiry for museum studies, given their role as a "set of records, a documentation system, and an embedded practice" that shapes museum practice in forceful ways (104). As a publication that blends elements of scholarly anthologies and exhibit catalogues, the *Many Voices* companion book stands out as a genre that both attends closely to a selection of objects from the exhibit, while overlaying the objects with analysis that extends the reach of the physical exhibit, and gives voice to the topics of race and migration that the exhibit addresses more obliquely.

In this sense, the exhibit anthology can be understood as a selective and critical version of the classic exhibit catalogue - an arm of the exhibit that compensates for the relegation of racism to the American past in the physical exhibit.

### **Autoethnography as Process and Method**

Autoethnographic writing acts as a grounding feature of this project, and bookends the analysis of the *Many Voices* exhibit. At its core, autoethnography is a way of formulating and addressing research questions that allows for the co-mingling of personal narratives of life experience and ethnographic observation and analysis. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) write, autoethnography is a methodology that “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (273). As a methodology that interrogates the tenets of positivist approaches to research, autoethnography is a motivated methodology that insists on the nature of research as inherently political, and one that ought to strive to be “socially-just and socially-conscious” (273). The combination of autobiographical writing with ethnography that forms autoethnography can thus be understood as constituting “both process and product” (273). This is certainly true of this project, whose questions are rooted in my own experiences with nation, difference, and display.

The value of autoethnography in museum research stems from its ability to connect “the self and the social”, as Deborah Reed-Danahay argues in her book *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (1997). As institutions positioned to grapple with the intricacies of identity in relation to national bodies, national history

museums elicit tensions between individual selves and collective identity in ways that autoethnographic research is able to engage. For museum researchers who understand themselves to be navigating the periphery of national belonging, autoethnography can provide a platform for extracting meaning from one's experiences that can then be used as a vehicle for museum analysis. As Reed-Danahay asserts, the liminal status of the autoethnographic voice can enhance the researcher's perspective as one who is both embedded in and outside of the social phenomenon they seek to research.

Reed-Danahay suggests that a central characteristic of an autoethnographic perspective is that "the autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity" (3). Reed-Danahay further suggests that the concept of 'dual identity' might be more accurately understood as the effect produced by "multiple, shifting identities", which she sees as counteracting the limitations of dichotomizing perspectives on identity (3). The confluence of identity and power inherent in history museums is a central element in what this project aims to interrogate, and the affordances of autoethnography allow for the interplay between my personal experiences and the experiences reflected in the museum exhibit. Given the role of the *Many Voices* exhibit to engage with identity as a complex and multi-vocal phenomenon, autoethnography provides me with the breadth to draw out the contradictory and boundary-crossing aspects of my own identity as I encounter the exhibit as an individual researcher.

Stemming from critiques of social science research methodologies that relied heavily on ontological and axiological understandings of evidence the emergence of

autoethnography can be understood as a response to the growing methodological malaise inspired by postmodernism in the 1980s (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner). Heewon Chang (2008) similarly views autoethnography as part of the “waxing interest in self-narratives in the contemporary scholarship of the humanities and social sciences” (43). In recognizing the impossibility and insufficiency of universal narratives, scholars sought to develop new understandings of the relationships between authors, texts, and audiences, realizing that “stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena” that “introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 274). This shift further offered new avenues to resist colonialist research tendencies, and to challenge the relationships of power between researchers and their subjects. These challenges to conventional relations of power mirror many of the critiques of museological practice that emerged from similar concerns, leading to changes in how museums were understood as social institutions.

Autoethnography has emerged as a methodology well-suited to research that investigates social difference and relations of power. Chang (2008) argues that this is due in part to the potential of autoethnography to evoke self-reflection and self-examination in both the researcher and the reader (51). As such, Chang understands autoethnography to be both a researcher-friendly and a reader-friendly methodology. For researchers, autoethnography provides a “privileged” and “intimate” perspective on their data, because researchers themselves constitute a central source of information. For readers, the unique voice of the researcher can compel a particularly

personal response that can lay the foundation for what Chang describes as “cross-cultural coalition building” (52). While autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative, it “transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (43). Chang further argues that autoethnography should be “ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (48).

Autoethnographers must therefore be willing to “dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them onto examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment” (51). Despite these distinctions between autobiographical storytelling and autoethnography, the decision to embed my own subjectivity, experiences, and perspectives into the research carried with it a responsibility to be aware of the space given to my own voice throughout the project.

The choice to engage in research about museums was at once a decision that follows from my scholarly interests, and one that derives from a life lived on the edges of belonging. National museums have often been a source of discontent and indignation in my life, at the same time as they have been loci of fascination, speculation, and critical hope. In her article “Epistemological Intimacy”, Claire Smith (2005) describes the process of conducting research on a topic to which one is so intimately connected, and outlines the potential pitfalls inherent in working in such close proximity to one’s area of research. The subjects of social difference taken up in the *Many Voices* exhibit - colonialism, migration, indigeneity, race, religion, gender - to name but a few, are aspects of my own identity that have troubled and fascinated me as a student and

scholar for decades. The fracturedness of a family trajectory marked by migration and subsequent diasporic cultural and linguistic evaporation shaped my early engagements with museums into a search for reflections of my world, my experiences, my body, my story. Often, the points of connection I perceived were few, leaving me both dissatisfied and confused. How could I understand the absence of so many experiences, inside an institution that purported to represent experience in such a totalizing way? In the absence of stories that reflected my own, I learned instead to search for familiarity among the narratives offered in museums, listening for instances of overlap and affective touchpoints that could help me think more deeply about difference, commonality, and collectivity, even when the stories I encountered were not my own. As Pelias (2003) asserts, autoethnography is a methodology that allows you to “use yourself to get to culture” (372). My autobiographical experiences with national history museums provided a vehicle through which I could understand, interpret and analyze the museum displays I encountered.

### **Discourse Analysis in Museums**

While the autoethnographic approach forms a point of departure for “getting to” the exhibit and institution examined in this thesis, the role of discourse analysis figures centrally as a methodological approach in the body of the project. As Norman Fairclough (2003) has emphasized, critical discourse analysis can be applied to a broader spectrum of what is understood to constitute discourse, in order to include visual culture, soundscapes, and landscapes, to name a few examples. Exhibition narratives are composed of multiple elements that range from textual components to

museum objects, to the discursive power of exhibit display itself. The textual components of exhibits can include informational labels that accompany individual objects, the longer interpretive texts that work to create cohesion among the objects in specific display cases, as well as the summative introductory and conclusory statements that often bookend exhibits at their entrances and exits. These linguistic components of museum exhibits interact with the object-based discourse created through the grouping and categorization of objects by curators, whose choices invariably communicate a narrative through the implied relationships between the objects presented. Finally, the design of the exhibit space itself further extends the discursive reach of an exhibit, working to direct visitor attention toward specific objects, to underscore the importance of certain objects over others, and to offer a temporal grounding to visitors through an ordered experience of the exhibit as they move from one section to the next. Finally, these discursive elements often exist alongside additional textual components such as exhibit catalogues, anthologies, and websites.

The rhetoricity of exhibitionary language constitutes a complex interaction of various registers, making it a genre that lends itself to the use of discourse analysis in working to understand and analyze how meaning-making takes place in museums. The use of objects in exhibit discourse further emphasizes the role of symbolism in museum displays, as objects are often selected to represent or 'stand in' for an event, epoch or concept. Discourse analysis allows the museum researcher to deconstruct exhibit messages by engaging with the convergence of the various registers of exhibit communication, from the textual, to the conceptual and symbolic, to the interpretive.



## **New Museology, New Methodologies**

When Peter Vergo coined the term “new museology” in the 1989 anthology of the same name, he was describing a host of changes occurring within the field of museum studies, change that included shifting public perceptions of museums, as well as scholarly reorientations that turned scholars in other disciplines towards museums as objects of inquiry. Vergo conceived of ‘new museology’ as a response to what had preceded it in the study of museums, defining it as a “state of widespread dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ museology, both within and outside the museum profession” (3). For Vergo, the term new museology indicated a conceptual shift in museum studies in which it could be seen as a “theoretical” or “humanistic” discipline, concerned with the politics of collection and display, the urgency of repatriation debates, and the complex historical context from which the modern museum emerged (3). Vergo’s assertions foreground the necessity of museum studies to reorient itself towards questions of power and ideology: “Whether we like it or not, every acquisition (and indeed disposal), every juxtaposition or arrangement of an object or work of art, within the context of a temporary exhibit or museum display means placing a certain construction upon history...” (2). This claim carries with it significant ramifications for methods in museum studies, and indeed the methods used in museum analysis have expanded in order to attend to these issues.

Where Vergo understands ‘old’ museology methodology to be primarily concerned with things such as museum administration, conservation techniques, and sponsor relations, his argument in favor of new museology foreshadows a shift towards

the application of cultural studies methods - textual analysis in particular - in order to understand museums as complex sites of meaning-making:

Beyond the captions, the information panels, the accompanying catalogue, the press handout, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands, woven from the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor - to say nothing of the society, the political or social or educational system which nurtured all these people and in doing so left its stamp upon them (3).

Vergo therefore argues in favor of a methodology for museum research that moves beyond the museum walls themselves, in order to attend to the socio-political context in which museums operate. The passage above reflects yet another, perhaps more critical suggestion related to the contested nature of museum texts. The “innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands” that he names suggest that museums are loci of discord, and that the heterogeneous nature of museum environments can itself become a site of inquiry.

The 1995 anthology *Museum, Media, Message* edited by Eileen Hooper-Greenhill provides insight into the ways in which museum scholars began to take up research methodologies from other disciplines, notably from mass communications theory, education and cultural studies. In her introduction to the volume, Hooper-Greenhill describes the shifting landscape of research methods in museum studies: “Our methodology in museums has not paid attention to methods used by communication and cultural theorists, and an over-reliance on behaviorist, positivist methods has failed to reveal the importance of audience decoding” (9). The sense that ‘old’ methods had “failed” echoes Peter Vergo’s assessment that a

“widespread dissatisfaction” had prompted a turn to new ways of studying museums. The challenges put to museums by various constituencies in the 1980s and 90s took aim at the question of power within museological practice, calling into question the assumed right of museums to hold, display, and preserve objects in the name of representing the past.

As a theory-based study of museums, this project insists on the place of museum theory as part of the body of work of critical cultural theory. As Susan Pearce (1992) argues “...in museums, as in everything else, theory and practice are indistinguishable: every time we take a museum decision, we are carrying out a philosophical act which arises from a cultural context and has cultural implications” (11). Over the past two decades, the move towards what Rhiannon Mason (2006) has called a “theoretical museology” has brought critical theory and museum studies into conversation in order to allow for a theoretical analysis of museums as distinct objects of cultural enquiry. In this sense, we might think of museum methods as both *emergent*, in the sense that they continue to unfold and develop, and *convergent* in that they combine the methodologies from the many fields that co-mingle with museum studies. This research project aligns itself with that shift, and in doing so attempts to consider the more discrete question of the role of museums in managing discourses of social difference and diversity, with attention to the ways in which national temporalities are manipulated through these discourses.

## Gathering Data

The exhibit *Many Voices, One Nation* at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) that forms the case study for this project opened in June 2017, and replaced the previous permanent survey exhibit *A Nation of Nations* which opened in March 1976. Like many large Smithsonian exhibits, *Many Voices* is comprised of two additional venues in addition to the physical exhibit located on the second floor the West Wing of the NMAH: an abbreviated online version of the exhibit, as well as an anthology, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press, of texts by scholars and museum professionals whose work overlaps with the themes and time periods present in the exhibit structure. While the online presence of museums has become an increasingly consequential form of museological display, this project considers only the physical exhibit located in the NMAH and the accompanying anthology of texts<sup>2</sup>. The study of the exhibit begins by panning outwards in order to consider the broader landscape within which the Smithsonian Institution and the NMAH are situated. This includes an understanding of the context from which the Smithsonian emerged, as well as the impetus for the establishment of the NMAH. In particular, I consider how the American relationship to the past impacted the establishment of the NMAH, and how an attention to progress continues to mold its practices. From there, I move into the exhibit itself in order to develop a closer analysis of each of its two registers, the physical exhibit and the anthology. Looking closely at design and presentation, object use, textual components, and critical and scholarly analyses, I explore the narratives about

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<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Mannoni's 1996 overview of online museum displays, as well as the December 1999 issue of *Museum International* which took online museology as its thematic focus.

social difference, history, nation and the future that is presented in each. Supported by my analysis of the exhibit as a whole, I offer case studies that elucidate the tensions surrounding the didactical imperative of museum exhibition, as the exhibit confronts ideas about American identity, social difference, racialization, and migration, projecting these themes onto a present-day canvas that I argue renders certain futures intelligible, while insisting on the non-belonging of those situated as foreigners. I isolate specific displays and objects in order to investigate how meanings about social difference are coded into the technologies of language and display. The exhibit and the anthology are both organized into four sections, each focusing on a particular slice of time ranging from 1492 at the outset, to the year 2000 when the exhibit's timeline comes to a close. I analyze the material in each section of the physical exhibit alongside its correlating section in the anthology, and I look for the places of overlap and divergence in each medium.

In order to gather data and information about the exhibits, I made several visits to the physical exhibit since its opening in 2017, as well as visits to the Archives Center located in the NMAH. During each visit, extensive field notes helped to create a record of my experience moving through the exhibits. In recording my observations during visits to the exhibits, I noted information about design elements such as lighting, order and flow of the various sections of the exhibits, accompanying information texts, the presence of sound and other audio-visual components, as well as the location of the exhibits within the buildings of the museums themselves. Photographs of the displays, which at first served a more perfunctory role as *aide-mémoires*, came to play an

increasingly meaningful role in supplementing my field notes. Several of my own photographs are included in this thesis as points of reference that also offer insight into my own perspective as a museum-goer. The exhibit anthology served as the primary resource for my analysis of the written register of the exhibit, while scholarly texts and reviews written about the exhibits, where any were available, were used to supplement the data. Although the subjectivity of my own perspective on the exhibits is inescapable, this project is not one that concerns itself with museum audiences or exhibit reception. Rather, the exhibits and case studies offer a platform for the study of how meanings about social difference are produced and exhibited in museum spaces, and then proceeds to consider the consequences of these articulations.

As patterns began to emerge in my readings of the exhibit sections, I pulled out themes from each time period that then served as the theoretical linchpins for my analysis of the exhibit. My approach included an analysis of the histories described in the exhibit, at the same time that my intervention has been historiographic in nature: I have both retraced the narratives while at the same time interrogating the context surrounding their creation. Patterns also emerged between the types of narratives and strategies of display present in the physical exhibit versus the anthology. My interrogation therefore included attention to the effects produced by the various methods employed in the anthology, for example, a deep reading of a single object, and how these approaches brought about very different narratives when compared to the object-saturated physical exhibit. The presence of counter-narratives and narratives of resistance to the concepts of national unity and universal freedom constituted another

key area of inquiry. The anthology is often positioned as a space in which alternate readings of the exhibit narrative were formulated, and my analysis of the anthology alongside the exhibit is therefore comparative in nature.

My project begins with a mapping of the establishment of the NMAH. Importantly, the establishment story of the museum reveals patterns surrounding the American discomfort with the concept of history, a discomfort that persisted despite the historical aspirations of its parent institution. The particular political, social and economic circumstances that impacted the foundation of the NMAH are therefore central to an analysis of the relationship between past, present and future established in the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit. The three axes of the political, social and economic realms form an analytical triad that structures my engagement with the history of each of the museum, and its connection to time. In the final chapter of the thesis, I compare the circumstances and context of the founding of the NMAH with the establishment of two other museums that are part of the Smithsonian national museum complex: the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. These establishment stories offer contrapuntal understandings of how national museological space and resources are allocated. In addition to these two museums, I analyze the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbour, Maine. The Abbe Museum is an indigenous museum affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution, but operating under its own governance structure. Over the past decade, the museum has undergone a process of decolonisation in its administration, content and curatorial practices that I explore as a site of museological resistance and reformulation.

## **Collection, Narration, Display**

What are the consequences of new museology for a methodology of museum analysis? How does the focus on “methods” described above by Vergo impact the manner in which museum studies is carried out? In her 1992 book *Museums, Objects, and Collections*, Susan Pearce describes an approach to postmodern museum studies as beginning with an analysis of the codes and patterns that govern museological praxis. An identification of these codes and patterns allows the researcher to begin with the question of power, which Pearce identifies as central to the project of analysis. Pearce asserts that “...where institutions like museums are concerned, the post-modern project involves admitting firstly that power play is implicit throughout the entire enterprise, past and present, and secondly, that this power operates through the social pattern” (232). In what follows, I draw on Pearce’s methodological interventions into the field of museum studies, in order to outline my own approach to the analysis of the three exhibits that form the case studies for this thesis.

Tracing the history of a museum and its collection is a task that extends beyond the descriptive. Certain elements in the story of a museum’s establishment are often easy to locate. In the case of the museums of the Smithsonian Institution, for example, information about funding structures, the year in which the museums were established by law, the year in which they first opened their doors and their respective governance models is readily available in both print and online publications. Beyond gathering this type of information, I suggest that the work of mapping the origins of a museological



institution requires attention to the dual significations of the archive. In *Archive Fever* (1995), Jacques Derrida describes this dual meaning through the imagery of the Greek *arkheion*. The literal residence of the superior magistrates, the *arkheion* was also the place in which legal documents were stored. Crucially, only the archons were positioned to interpret the archives (2). The relationship between power and the archive is explicit in Derrida's analysis: the archives were documents of law, and only the archons were empowered to "speak the law" (2). On the one hand, the archive is a collection that references an originary status. On the other hand, the archive is also a locus of power: those within it both gather and interpret that which is collected.

Beyond the entitlement to interpretation given to the archons, Derrida stresses that the *arkheion* is also a place of residence that straddles the public and private realms: the archons are domiciled in the *arkheion*, yet it also the site at which the contents of the archive are rendered public: "It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public..." (2). The establishment of an archive thus compels us to consider not only the trajectories of the objects themselves alongside the physical residence in which they are housed, but also the locus from which their interpretation emerges from the private to the public spheres.

In addition to this movement between public and private spheres, another form of interpretive action takes place in the *arkheion*: that of assembling the archive, ordering it, categorizing it. Derrida introduces the concept of *consignation*, as a process that is central to the *arkheion*. For Derrida, consignation is more than the mere depositing of

objects in a particular location. Rather, he understands the process as *consignation*, quite literally, the “gathering together” of signs (3). “Consignation”, he writes, “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (3). “In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity” (3). The study of an archive is therefore more than a simple assessment of methods of classification and categorization, it is also an inquiry into the unifying logic that underlies the collection.

In order to analyze the treatment of the themes of social difference in the *Many Voices* exhibit, I rely on methods of textual analysis drawn largely from cultural studies approaches. Beginning with a “thick” description (Geertz 1973; Holloway 1997) of the establishment of the museum, I then move inwards to consider the individual exhibit and its component parts. Although audience reception research has been employed in museum studies as a method of textual analysis, this project centers my own analysis. As Alan McKee (2003) writes, “every description of a text in an interpretation” (52), and I recognize that what I describe here as “analysis” also constitutes a form of subjective interpretation. Indeed, my interpretation of the exhibits seeks to identify themes and patterns in representative logic and strategies, and to test the relevance of these patterns by situating them alongside theories of representation.

I consider the history of the establishment of the NMAH, its archive/collection, its architectural design and its funding structure. Against the backdrop of this broad picture of the museum, I then focus on the individual exhibition in order to consider how it takes up the concept of social difference, and what mechanisms it employs in order to bring

messages about American identity and belonging to the fore. Roger Silverstone (1989) describes the concept of narrativity in museums as related to a trajectory: an intended path of interpretation laid out by collectors and curators. For Silverstone, the museum is positioned as a medium, a vehicle through which a set of cumulative messages are organized for the museum-goer:

The study of the narrativity of the museum or the heritage display involves a study of an exhibition's capacity to define a route (material, pedagogic, aesthetic) for the visitor, and to define thereby a particular logic of representation, a particular legitimate and plausible coherence for itself. (143-4)

Within the narrative structure of the museum, Silverstone identifies conflicting roles that the museum must navigate. On the one hand, the museum acts as a storyteller and myth-maker, on the other, it must also work to imitate reality, if its narrative is to be received as plausible (143). The competing forces placed on museums therefore position curators as having to move between the "mythic" and the "mimetic" in the design of their exhibits, having to balance the task of imitating reality, while weaving a narrative trajectory for museum-goers to follow.

In his 1989 essay "The Reticent Object", Peter Vergo similarly describes the embeddedness of a narrative that lies at the heart of museum exhibits. Vergo argues that objects in an exhibit are "brought together not simply for the sake of their physical manifestation or juxtaposition, but because they are part of a story one is trying to tell" (46). Textual analysis therefore requires attention not only to the component parts of an exhibit, and the individual objects showcased within it, but to the narrative arc produced by the coming together of the objects under the auspices of a unifying theme or concept. Vergo further suggests that objects undergo a process of re-signification that

confers on them a meaning that extends beyond the significance that they may have had as cultural or aesthetic objects outside of the exhibit context. Echoing Derrida's concept of consignation, Vergo argues that through their inclusion in an exhibition, objects "become not merely works of art or tokens of a certain culture or society, but elements of a narrative, forming part of a thread of discourse which is itself one element in a more complex web of meanings" (46). This approach asks that we consider the exhibitional space as a whole, tracing the narrative structure of the assembled objects and their correlating descriptions, and extending this analysis into the museum writ large in order to include the relationships between exhibits and galleries, practices of acquisition and archiving, as well as the museum's relationship to the larger social and institutional assemblages of which it is a part. A textual methodology further invites the possibility of a distanced approach to museum study, stepping away from the privileging of a singular aspect of the museum (e.g. its building, curatorial staff, institutional status) in favor of an understanding of the museum as comprised of a range of interlocking elements that must be considered as a system.

My analysis also included the museological elements that are often considered to be peripheral to the exhibit experience. The landscape surrounding the museums is of deep significance to the meanings they produce. Each of the three museums that I consider in this project are situated on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in the monumental core of the American capital city. As a site whose design has been contested since it was first imagined by planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1791, I begin by examining the placement of the museums on the Mall, as well as the trajectories of

each museum as they were envisioned and constructed. The lexicon of architecture is an integral part of the meanings produced by museums, and the relative uniformity in the architecture of the museological institutions that proliferated during the nineteenth century speaks to their assumed position in the civic world. As Steven Conn (2010) argues, until relatively recently, the public museum has been the object of a largely stagnant visual vocabulary. Conn further writes that the homogeneity of early American museum architecture reflects an attachment to Greek and Roman design, with “spare neoclassicism” becoming the standard architectural form for museums large and small (203). The significance of this uniformity, suggests Conn, is indicative of not only the aesthetic codes and standards of the time, but also of the “widely shared set of assumptions” and “uniformity of purpose” attached to museums more generally (203). Beyond the exterior appearance of museum buildings, the interior design and organization of early American museums add additional emphasis to the messaging of the building’s shell. As Michaela Giebelhausen (2006) has noted, postmodernism has had a significant impact on museum architecture, bringing to the fore the sometimes oppositional uses of museums as both monuments on the one hand and vehicles for the display of objects on the other. While early American museum design borrowed heavily from the early nineteenth century designs for European museums, the buildings that house the NMAH, NMAI and NMAAHC were each designed with a keen awareness of the interaction between the building and its contents. As understandings and expectations of museums have shifted, so too have approaches to both their interior

and exterior design. Architectural design therefore forms part of the elements that give museums and their exhibits meaning.

### **Exhibiting Difference**

In 1898, Sir William Henry Flower, director of the Natural History Department of the British Museum, argued that “It is not the objects placed in a museum that constitute its value, so much as the method in which they are displayed and the use made of them for the purpose of instruction” (55). Changing understandings of the role of national museums has been mirrored by new approaches to exhibit design. Changes in exhibit design have also responded to changing relationships to the display of objects altogether. What does it mean to exhibit difference? If, as Derrida asserts, the archive is ordered such that there is no heterogeneity within it, how might I situate a research project aimed at investigating how difference is exhibited? In a literal sense, the idea of difference - of remarkability - has always been central to the logic of museum exhibitions. An exhibit becomes viable if and when the objects it contains are understood to be worthy of display, that is to say, if the objects it contains have been given the signified as remarkable. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that the study of categorization requires that we ask “what modalities of order have been recognized, posited, linked with space and time, in order to create the positive basis of knowledge as we find it employed in grammar and philology, in natural history and biology, in the study of wealth and political economy” (xxi). I suggest that in order to investigate the mechanisms at work in the exhibition of social difference in museums,

we must move beyond a quantification of representations of difference, and instead ask what governing logic has been used to differentiate between human experiences in the first instance. This approach is not at odds with Derrida's claim that the archive is ordered in such a way as to avoid heterogeneity. While social difference may variously appear as gendered, racialized, classed, sexed, legal/illegalized - to name a few categories - difference can also operate as a normative concept. It is this logic of difference as a normalizing concept with which my analysis of the displayed objects in the *Many Voices* exhibit is concerned.

The question of social difference museum exhibits also requires attention to the way in which exhibition stories often reference evolutionary models of development and progress. Narratives of social difference, particularly racialized and gendered difference, are intimately tied to concepts, just as narratives of national development and independence (particularly in the United States) mirror this logic. As Sarita Echavez See (2017) shows in her analysis of the Filipino exhibit at the University of Michigan Natural History Museum, the placement of objects; their sequence and proximity to other objects, can "speak volumes" about the underlying logic of progress in an exhibit, even when there is no formal explanation of this provided by the curators themselves (26). The significance of the exhibitional narrative produced by an exhibit relates closely to the knowledge it portends to produce. Echavez See further argues that in the University of Michigan Natural History Museum's anthropology exhibit, the "collections of the "primitive" symbolize both the racial origins that (white European) Man has transcended and the ideological origins of the accumulative drive towards power/knowledge" (28).

While textual analysis can elucidate some of the underlying assumptions that guide exhibit design, my analysis of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit also endeavors to uncover exhibitional interventions that might function to disrupt this practice.



## Chapter Three

### Against History: Establishing the National Museum of American History

The story of the American relationship to the concept of history is intertwined with the political birth of the nation, and in particular, with the oppositional relationship with Britain as an obstacle to American independence. Henry David Thoreau's characterization of England as "an old gentleman who is traveling with a great deal of baggage, trumpery which accumulated from long housekeeping, which he has not had the courage to burn" (74), describes the disdain for history that shaped early American approaches to conservation and commemoration. During the latter part of the eighteenth into the early nineteenth century, a general disregard for the value of preservation prevailed over many decisions to dismantle sites of historic importance. Even Independence Hall in Philadelphia nearly fell victim to urban planners who proposed using its location for new development. Thoreau's statement about the uselessness of the "baggage" of the past contrasts interestingly with the contemporary nickname for the Smithsonian Institution, often described as the "nation's attic". Both conceptions describe competing understandings of the role of preservation, and of the collection of objects as interlocutors of the nation's past. In the first instance, objects from the past are weighty and burdensome, requiring "courage" in order to cast them aside and leave them behind. The past, in the Thoreauvian view, is an obstacle to be overcome. In the second conception, the Smithsonian Institution is described as the repository for the nation's objects, objects that ought to be collected and preserved for

consideration and study by future generations. It is surely not accidental, furthermore, that the space used to describe the Smithsonian is one typically found in a home. The Smithsonian Institution's museums are thus likened to the space reserved for a family's belongings, crystallizing the notion of American citizenry as united through the bonds of an imagined kinship. As David Lowenthal has pointed out, the American ambivalence towards the past is often expressed through "metaphors of filial conflict" (185).

Lowenthal references the "deification" of the Founding Fathers as an example of how these metaphors shaped American relationships to nation and history. In contrast to the reverence for the Founding Fathers stood the "national mission to sweep away the past and look only forward" (185). Given the trajectory of the American relationship to the concept of history, the story of the establishment and expansion of the Smithsonian Institution, and of the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in particular, can elucidate the complexity of representing the American past for a national audience. How did the United States, a country that purportedly possessed the courage to cast aside the past, come to have one of the most expansive networks of national museums in the world? What elements prompted this shift in American conceptions of the past, and what precipitated it such that it occurred within the relatively short time span of roughly 100 years?

What is the relationship between memory and public history? As historian Michael Frisch points out, history as a discipline has had an uncomfortable relationship to the notion of memory, given its investment in notions of academic objectivity, and in the importance of constituting history as a field of knowledge that extends beyond the

confines of the ability to recall events of the past (16). Despite this discomfort with the notion of memory as it relates to the discipline of history, remembrance remains a frequently-invoked concept in commemorative practices, ranging from state-sanctioned holidays, to monuments, statues and museological practice. The invocation of 'memory' as a process at work in spaces of public historicization thus functions to naturalize discourses of history, removing them from the realm of things constructed, instead placing them squarely in the domain of things remembered. In this way, commemoration of the past is blurred with remembering, often in ways that make the slippage imperceptible. Consider the name given to the day set aside for the commemoration of veterans of the United States military: Memorial Day. The very name of the holiday and the common practices associated with its observance, facilitates the slippage between memory and history, such that observers are often interpellated to "remember" a past that they may not have directly experienced. This mechanism, present in so many national holidays, is a familiar technology of contemporary nationalist remembrance, in which a reproduced narrative stands in for memory, and remembering becomes synonymous with recounting stories of the past, often in conjunction with ceremonies and rituals of a public nature. Frisch suggests that the very nature of historical sensitivity and consciousness in American society must form the starting point for inquiry into practices surrounding public history. Arguing that the process of producing and reproducing historical memory is itself a critical subject of inquiry, Frisch writes that historical memory is "capable of saying a great deal about how the past does or doesn't figure in our lives, and this in turn tells us about both history and ourselves" (16).

In describing the function of the trope of progress in exhibitions, Tony Bennett (1995) references the character Zadig from Voltaire's *Zadig ou la Destinée* (1747). Zadig, a Babylonian philosopher living in ancient times, is depicted as having the ability to visualize an animal simply by inspecting its tracks. This ability, described as 'retrospective prophecy' by English biologist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1882, elucidates the approach to historical representations that so often characterizes museum display. The museum, argues Bennett, is a "backteller": an institution that "materially instantiates the retrospective prophecies" of history in order to narrativize the past as a string of related events, progressing ever forward in their achievements and outcomes (179). The relationship of museums to the pasts they represent (and arguably all museums occupy such a temporal position), is one in which they must render a retroactive intelligibility to events, objects and sequences that the majority of museum-goers will not have directly experienced. Tony Bennett asserts that this "narrative machinery" is a characteristic of the contemporary historical exhibit, inherited from the early appearance of the institution of the modern museum (181). As a museum of history, the NMAH embodies the contradictory drive to both reconstruct and preserve the past, as well to depict progress and development. As Susan Crane (2011) points out in her work on the relationship of museums to time and memory, history museums have come to "represent a stable reference point of cultural heritage" at the same time as they have emerged as "the institutions most clearly committed to representing the mechanisms of change" (99). The museum must therefore balance the need to preserve objects from

the past at the same time as it must imbue them with meaning of import to the present, and in doing so, the museum must also tell a tale of advancement.

### **Remembrance as Texture**

The establishment and expansion of the Smithsonian Institution over the past 170 years brings to the fore several conjoined avenues of inquiry. In the first instance, its story is revelatory of the development of museological practice in the United States, as it shifted from the collection and classification of the natural world, towards an interest in using museums as venues through which to represent human cultures and experiences. The Smithsonian's trajectory also provides insight into the vexed relationship between the past, present and future that has coloured American self-narratives since the country's inception. Finally, the Smithsonian Institution provides a robust example through which to investigate the relationship between remembering and remembrance, and specifically to consider the ways in which these two processes appear within the work of the Institution. Dietrich Harth (2008) takes up this question by first evaluating the relationship between the lexical field populated by the terms remembering, memory and remembrance (85). The first two terms, remembering and memory, refer first and foremost to processes of internalization, in the sense of the cognitive (and often highly individualized) work of remembering or recalling a memory. The final term, remembrance, evokes a very different process, one in which meanings are produced and invoked, encouraging the connection of memory and remembering to a larger and much broader network of possible social meanings. The ritualized and

often public nature of remembrance further distinguishes it from the typically private act of remembering. Harth proposes the use of the metaphor of a net as a conceptual tool for understanding the inner workings of the relationship between remembering, memory and remembrance, as well as their connection to both individual and collective processes. Drawing from neuroscientific and psychological memory research, Harth suggests that the metaphor of the net illustrates both the “coordinative” and “cooperative” activities of remembering, bringing attention to both the “inner (neuronal)” and “external (social)” elements at play in the remembering-memory-remembrance nexus (85). The focus on museums, though they are not unrelated to the elements of remembering and memory, orients this project towards the element of remembrance, which includes the ritualized and formalized practices of representing and documenting past events. In contrast to the imagery of the archive - a metaphor often used to describe the work of collecting and categorizing that is so central to museological practice - the concept of the net takes on the form of a “cybernetic explanatory model” which can shed light on the process of meaning-making that connects remembering and memory to remembrance. Although the imagery of the net does not account for the myriad hierarchies that traverse the processes of remembering and remembrance, Harth argues that it can offer what he calls an “epistemology of relations” that helps to elucidate the areas of connection and interaction within a given social context (85). While accounting for the vertically organized structures of power that shape relations with the past is a central concern of this project, the imagery of the net offers a descriptive power to the practices of remembering-remembrance that lie at the heart of

what the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History must engage in. In order to fashion a theoretical tool that is able to engage with the elements of vertically-organized relations of power, I suggest an expanded understanding of the metaphor of the net.

At its simplest, the image of a net evokes a set of individual threads, knotted together to form an almost infinite collection of nodes. As meeting points, these nodes might combine multiple individual threads, creating knots of varying thicknesses and strengths. Harth encourages a consideration of texture as a way of understanding how the metaphor of the net can function to describe different manifestations of the relationship between remembering and remembrance. Were we to consider the variance in textures made possible by different processes of netting and knotting, we could easily envisage a range of textural outcomes: nets of varying permeability, fabrics and rugs, to name a few possibilities. I propose that the idea of texture be placed as a central theoretical framework for the analysis of historiographic and museological practices in the Smithsonian Institution. Drawing also on Jan Assmann's use of the term "connective structure" as a means through which to understand the linking of individual subjects within a common world of meaning, I propose that the characteristic of texture can be used to explain the intersection of threads of meaning with the hierarchical elements of power that so often determine the thickness and strength of the nodes that bind them. As a two-dimensional concept, the net metaphor is less able to account for the relations of power that shape the remembering, memory, remembrance nexus. If it remains relegated to two-dimensional status, we have little ability to envisage how the

pressures of group identity, relations of power, economic tensions and nationalist projects impact the work of remembrance. As Harth argues: “The denser the net, the more it resembles a fabric”, suggesting that the differences between a net and a fabric become less important if we consider the similarity of the processes involved in their production (86). Though their methods of production may be similar, the uses of each vary dramatically, in large part due to the differences in texture ascribed to them.

Returning to the three terms identified by Harth as forming the lexical field of remembering, memory and remembrance, I want to suggest that we think of the interlocking work of these three terms as highly textural. In instances where the texture is less dense, the image of a net may be apt: elements can pass through it, and there is a transparency to the structure that makes its component threads discernable. On the other hand, in instances where the structure is more dense, not only do things cease to be able to pass through its openings, but its component parts become almost indistinguishable from one another. A high-density context is one in which the net has the appearance of a solid form, an expansive textile with little space for internal navigation. It is through the density, rather than the structure, of the network that relations of power make their impressions, and function to either restrict or allow multivalent interpretations of the past.

While the density of the net of historiography changes over time, one way of understanding shifts in American historiography is to think of the net as one that tightens (becomes more dense), and loosens in different moments. The effects of these changes in texture are to restrict or limit the possible connections, or instead to offer a



broader range of possible connections. In a dense environment of remembrance, there is little room to broaden one's scope, to explore other avenues, to see beyond those nodes that constrain our relationship to our past. The tightening and loosening of the texture of historiography is a conceptual tool that is helpful in understanding the various stages and trends that have shaped American relationships to the narrativization of the past. It is also a helpful framework for understanding the varying levels of tolerance for what we might think of as historiographic creativity that exists over time.

### **A Nation Outside of History**

The American relationship to historicization is one that, in many ways, follows the nationalist project to document and represent the nation that is shared by other settler societies. Undoubtedly, the urgency with which the Smithsonian Institution was deployed in service of the nation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resembles similar initiatives in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere (McCarthy 2018; MacKenzie 2017), yet the American context diverges from the patterns established in imperial settler societies in its troubled relationship to the very idea of history - a tension which persists in shaping museological and commemorative practices at the Smithsonian Institution and beyond. From the outset of its founding, the United States has been connected to ideas of exceptionalism and fatalism, often positioning it as a nation existing outside of history, and embedding in its story elements of divine intervention and singularity. Adding to the weight of the history of the colonial conquest of the land, the United States must also grapple with its entanglement with

the institution of slavery, complicating the ways in which a national story can be constructed and represented in museological spaces. As institutions, museums have traditionally been spaces of historical representation, and the question of how to exhibit struggles that are ongoing in nature adds to the demands made of national museums.

The role of religion in shaping the American relationship to history is critical, and while settler societies across the globe have certainly shared a religious element in their development, the American example stands out in its particular relationship to religion, and the connection to a providential view of settlement. The Puritan perspective set the stage for the American Revolution, and brought about a climate in which government and religious purity were enmeshed with one another in ways that continue to shape public discourse on the role of government in the United States today. From the 1600s, American history was largely understood as being providential in nature, that is, connected primarily to a sense of the future, as opposed to a sense of the past. John Winthrop's journal, written between 1630 and 1649, provides a window into the Puritan ideology that imprinted the first colonies. Winthrop's descriptions of life in Massachusetts reveals a deep-seated belief in the doctrine of predestination, and describes how it became transposed onto his ideas about the political, social and religious life of the colonies. For the Puritans, the departure from England in order to establish settlements in the New World was representative of their belief that they were destined to save England from itself. Dissatisfied with the political and religious climate in Britain, the establishment of colonies in New England were initially thought to be a step in the eventual reformation of the Church of England. When that project failed, the

severing of ties with England emerged as the inevitable solution to a range of political and religious concerns. As such, the American Revolution and its corresponding ideologies were mired in the religious convictions of the Puritans, and the American Revolution was therefore primarily understood as an act of God's will, and not as a solely political undertaking. The facile use of the expression "God bless America" is one example of how naturally the connection to religion emerges within the context of contemporary political discourse. Though the expression was popularized during World War I with Irving Berlin's song of the same title, the sentiment evokes an exceptional connection between God and the American nation that echoes the claims of the early colonists and American Revolutionaries. Crucially, the expression suggests that it is the nation itself, rather than its inhabitants, that is worthy of being blessed by God. Although other trends tempered the connection between religion and history in the United States, the Puritan foundations of the nation surface easily in public customs and discourse.

With the spread of Enlightenment principles, the providential period in American historiography shifted in the early 1700s to focus on the concepts of natural law and reason as the central sources of American progress and exceptionalism. In his 1785 book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson documented this turn in American political thought which established several ideological departures from Puritan-influenced conceptions of history. The concepts of the separation between church and state, as well as the value of individual liberty and constitutional government represented a critical change in the providential approach to the historicization of the United States. History became a malleable concept during this period, an arena in

which human agency was the primary force acting upon the past. Importantly, at the same time that it helped to establish a turn in American conceptions of the past, *Notes on the State of Virginia* also entrenched the logic of white supremacy in the fabric of American identity. Jefferson predicted that a free society in which people of all races could coexist would not be possible, positioning himself as both the champion of enlightenment thinking in the United States, and as the purveyor of the logic of racial inequality that pervades the nation.

This period of historiography is often referred to as the rationalist period, and is also characterized by a scholarly turn in approaches to American historiography. David Ramsay's *The History of the American Revolution* (1789), often referenced as the first book to receive copyright in the United States, marked a departure from the providential accounts of American history. As historian Karen O'Brien (1994) remarks, in many ways, Ramsay's approach more closely resembles European philosophical and Enlightenment period texts. O'Brien argues that Ramsay's text "poses a challenge to this American exceptionalist literary framework by presenting itself as a part of Enlightenment European historical tradition" (2). While the notion of American exceptionalism was certainly present in historical accounts from this period, there was nonetheless a rupture with the Puritan conception of the United States.

From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, a nationalist tendency pervaded accounts of the history of the United States. In the post-revolutionary period, a strong identification with Anglo-Saxon identity and a belief in its inherent superiority was shared by American historians. Specifically, the idea that American democratic ideals

could be exported in order to influence the political landscape abroad corresponded with the belief in the supremacy of the American democratic model. Henry Adams' nine volume work *The History of the United States of America 1801-1817*, exemplifies the nationalist perspective on historiography that permeated this period. Adams identified the period of post-Revolution as one that was rife with challenges to the success of the new nation, but also one that was prone to repeat the errors of European nations. In describing the obstacles that lay on the path to a unified national identity in post-revolutionary America, Adams wrote:

“Nearly every foreign traveller who visited the United States during these early years carried away an impression sober if not sad. A thousand miles of desolate and dreary forest, broken here and there by settlements; along the sea coast a few flourishing towns devoted to commerce; no arts, a provincial literature, a cancerous disease of negro slavery, and differences of political theory fortified within geographical lines, - what could be hoped for such a country except to repeat the story of violence and brutality which the world already knew by heart, until repetition for thousands of years had wearied and sickened mankind?” (156)

While his account is somber in tone, Adams nonetheless suggests that the United States was the locus of hope for the larger world; a social experiment in democratic nation-building in which the promise of Enlightenment thinking could be made manifest. Crucially, this perspective sets the stage for a historiography that looks upon the past with disdain and suspicion, choosing instead to write the story of the nation as a forward-looking tale in which the ills of the past are overcome.

Even in this period, there were some who expressed a sense that the weight of the country's history was more than what historiography could accommodate. Author and abolitionist William Wells Brown, in an 1847 address to the Female Anti-Slavery

Society of Salem, Massachusetts, described the impossibility of representing the reality of slavery, stating that any attempt to represent it could only fail (Ernest 2004). As John Ernest (2004) argues, even as a growing number of African American writers were working to present counter-histories that attended to the realities of racism in the United States, there was an awareness that an African American historiography would “necessarily be a performance on the limited stage available to African Americans in the white American theatre of history” (40). The refusal to deal with the reality that the United States had been marred by conflict supported the idea of American exceptionalism and national unity, aiding in the promotion of a form of forgetting that masqueraded as remembrance.

At the same time that American history was being tamed and shaped for domestic purposes, exhibitional practice across the Western world was shifting to attend to the question of human culture through the lens of world fairs and exhibitions. To a large extent, the exhibitional patterns that took root in the United States in the early half of the twentieth century followed emerging patterns for the exhibition of history elsewhere. With the proliferation of world exhibitions, the tendency toward encyclopedic displays expanded, as major cities across Europe and North America began to host events aimed at condensing the entire globe into one exhibitional space. Inherent in the very structure of the world exhibition is a profound belief in the capacity of museological display to encompass knowledge. Indeed, world exhibitions became emblematic of humankind’s ability to collect, document and understand the world and its content in almost absolute terms.

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago borrowed from the tradition of international exhibitions that had been taking place in Europe since the Crystal Palace Exhibition took place in London in 1851. While the fair replicated the anthropological style of the fairs that had preceded it, there was a marked absence of African American representation. In his introduction to the 1893 book *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, Robert Rydell described the fair as being aimed at “Trumpeting America’s own national progress”, even as it refused to contend with its own failures. In both its planning and design, as well as its content, the fair failed to incorporate the perspectives, experiences and contributions of African Americans. Rydell described the impact of the Columbian Exposition on African Americans who saw only their absence in the fair:

As the racist underpinnings of the utopia projected by the fair became clear, many African Americans concluded that the World’s Columbian Exposition, with its radiant White City, had become nothing less than a Frankenstein, the cultural counterpart to the lynchings that claimed 161 African-American lives in 1892 alone. (xiii)

Initially published and circulated as a pamphlet by Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland-Penn and Ferdinand Barnett, *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* was a response to the racism of the fair that its authors hoped would bring the question of American racism to the foreground. Rydell notes that the pamphlet did not receive much notice from the fair’s organizers, while at the same time it exacerbated divisions within the African American community, as some were “embarrassed about having their obvious absence from the exposition called to international attention” (xiii). Rydell’s introduction to the pamphlet, published in 1999,

returned *The Reason Why* to its rightful place in dialogue with the World's Columbian Exposition, after over a century of its critique having been nearly absent in interpretations of the fair. Rydell suggests that when taken alongside one another, the "two texts" of the fair and the pamphlet, "underscore the cultural construction of racism in post-Reconstruction America" (xiii). While the colonialism of other nations could be tolerated within the parameters of the fair, the white supremacy of the United States could not be named or represented. As an extension of the impulse to manipulate American historiography to serve the needs of the nation, the fair underscored the fact that official formations of American identity, both past, present and future, were incapable of contending with the realities of historic slave-trading and ongoing segregation. Even as events intended to commemorate historic events began to proliferate, the American disavowal of history persisted.

The years after the first World War through to the 1940s represented a period of diffusion in the writing of American histories. Against the backdrop of domestic struggles over immigration and workers' rights, together with their corresponding struggles abroad, there emerged a trend in historiography in which differences in class, ideology and regional identities were foregrounded as sources of social conflict that shaped the American political landscape. Charles Beard's landmark text *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) exemplifies this trend. By painting an economic portrait of the Founding Fathers and attendees of the Constitutional Convention, Beard argued that the Constitution was designed to safeguard the financial interests of those who crafted it, and that its creators constituted a cohesive interest



group in their own right. In contrast to Beard's focus on class, Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" situates social struggle in the conception of the American West, pointing to notions of Western expansionism as critical to American identity, and to the rapid pace of social change as a distinguishing characteristic of American society: "The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life" (197). Despite the differences in their areas of focus, both Beard and Turner represent a tendency towards causal explanations in American historiography, in which the trajectory of the nation is understood as being shaped primarily through social tensions specific to American society.

Following the 1940s, a period of generalized consensus in American scholarly historiography ensued, shaped by reactionary politics that emerged in response to the progressive tendencies of the earlier part of the 20th century. Consensus historiography posited that the social, political and economic values of Americans were largely coherent, and that little discord existed among the various groups within American society about things such as meritocracy, free markets, and the rights of private property. Historian Ian Tyrell (1991) describes the pervasiveness of consensus historiography as having positioned the United States as a "special case "outside" of the normal patterns and laws of history" (1031). "In this liberal world view", writes Tyrell, "the

United States avoided the class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval, and authoritarian governments of “Europe” and presented to the world an example of liberty to emulate” (1031). With the rise of communist governments abroad and the threat of the Cold War impacting domestic politics, historiography from the 1940s to the 1960s sought to uphold the notion of a set of shared American values that lay at the foundation of American national identity. Inter-group differences and conflicts were typically minimized in favor of historical accounts that imagined the United States as a nation unanimously committed to the ideals of individual liberty and private property. Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) and Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* (1955) both characterize the American story as a triumph of liberty and democracy - an approach that led historian John Higham to coin the term “consensus history” in 1963. For Higham, the consensus approach to American history was self-congratulatory in its aims, and functioned to obscure the diversity and conflict that played so prevalent a role in early American history.

The Antebellum Americans were not particularly inclined to think of historicization as a process vital to the project of American nation-building. Indeed, the revolutionary nature of the American self-image tainted the relationship of the early nation to even its own past. During the period between the American Revolution (1765-1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865), American nation-building was characterized by conflict surrounding how to engage in national historicization through collection and preservation. As Michael Wallace describes in “Visiting the Past”, even the Hall of Independence in Philadelphia was at risk of being demolished in 1812 in order for the land it stood on to

be sold to developers (64). Although protesters ultimately saved it from total destruction, their efforts were not able to stop the removal of woodwork from the building, including from the room in which the signing of the Declaration of Independence took place in 1776 (64). George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, was similarly salvaged by the establishment of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, an organization that saved the estate from being transformed into a hotel in 1850, and which is still in charge of the preservation and public use of the site. To think of these two buildings, which have today become national landmarks enshrined in history textbooks and tour group itineraries, as being at risk of demolition or transformation into sites for private use seems altogether incongruous with the contemporary approach to the preservation of sites deemed to be of national historic importance. Yet this sinuous trajectory reveals the complexity of the relationship to the past that continues to shape American ideas of progress, history and national identity.

The idea of American ahistoricity was connected to belief in the exceptional status of the United States, which as a concept was exemplified in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that considered the expansion of the United States to be both inevitable and willed by God. Scott Swank (1991) describes the unease surrounding preservation in the period following the American Revolution, during which time "a powerful ambivalence prevailed among political and social elites about the role of history in the life of the new Republic" (86). Swank argues that America was largely understood to be a "youthful" nation, "looking to the present and future rather than to the past" (86). In this sense, notions of American exceptionalism also fueled understandings

of the role of history during this period, often positioning the United States as being outside of history altogether, viewing it as a “bold, new human experiment with no allegiance to the European past” (86). The inattention to the more recent events in American history in the post-Revolutionary period can therefore be understood as a symptom of American exceptionalism as expressed in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: the nation’s history did not need to be recorded, because its destiny had already been written.

While the post-Revolutionary period was coloured by a tumultuous relationship to the preservation of sites and objects of importance to the history of the nation, ethnographic collecting, and the establishment of (mostly private) collections of Native American objects and human remains flourished during this time. As Reginald Horsman (1981) has argued, Manifest Destiny was also understood as racial destiny, and the belief that white Americans were “the most distinguished descendants of the Anglo-Saxons grew rather than diminished in the decades after the Revolution” (81). In tandem with the idea of American exceptionalism, the interest in the collection of Native American artifacts played a supportive role in the mythologization of Indigenous populations as noble, savage and largely extinct (LaDuke 2005). To collect and document the artifacts of Indigenous cultures was also to confirm their absence, thus making their conquest an unquestionable fact of history, rather than a contested site of ongoing struggle, conflict and resistance. Alongside the proliferation of ethnographic collections and displays during the early half of the nineteenth century, interest in the collection and categorization of the flora and fauna of the United States gave way to the

establishment of various natural history museums, including the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (established in 1869) and the Smithsonian Institution (established in 1846). The American relationship to the concept of history therefore encompasses an extreme dissatisfaction with historicized relations of power, while at the same time relying heavily on the discursive production of historicized Others in order to explain and justify the emergence of the United States. The museological tendencies of the young nation followed the logic of colonial racial hierarchies, relegating the Indigenous population to the realm of nature, and approaching the categorization of the natural world as part of the process of appropriation of and expansion into the land.

If the American Revolution produced a widespread suspicion toward the very concept of history, the crisis in national unity brought on by the American Civil War served to bolster an interest in preservation and historicization. Occurring less than a hundred years after the culmination of the American Revolutionary War, the Civil War further intensified the discord surrounding the preservation and exhibition of America's past, and thrust the nation into a period of intensive conservation initiatives (Wallace, 1981). By the 1880s, a shift began to occur in the attitude of the dominant classes towards the idea of history. The establishment of ancestral and historical societies coincided with efforts to preserve historic buildings and battlefields. Crucially, the preservation of these sites involved making them public, marking a turning point in the purpose of preservation work from a private act of collecting, to a public process connected to collective remembrance. A movement pushing the project of 'Americanization' was thus underway. Michael Wallace suggests that these early

attempts at Americanization were rooted in a bourgeois concern for social structures that seemed increasingly to be threatened by the presence of popular movements centered around workers' and immigrant rights. The class of dominant land-owners and those who had accumulated early-industrial fortunes found themselves in need of a collective identity that could differentiate them from "immigrant aliens with subversive ideologies" apparently positioning themselves to infringe on their way of life. The concept of a truly American inheritance of which they were the rightful stewards allowed them to fuse patriotism with class interests, such that the past was "transformed into an abstract symbol of Order" (68). The wielding of history as an ideological tool shaped the earliest efforts to historicize the American nation.

As the mobilization of history as a method of control fused with anxieties over immigration and class instability, conceptions of a mythic American past formed the basis for attacks on plurality more broadly. As Donaldo Macedo (2000) has argued, the Americanization efforts of the early nineteenth century honed in on multilingual education as a site in which un-American tendencies were nurtured, marking a disavowal of the linguistic, religious and ethnic pluralism that had shaped American immigration since the eighteenth century. The unequivocal association between American identity and the English language was cemented in policies and practices that resulted in the linguistic diversity of the nation hitting a historical low in the mid-nineteenth century (Nieto, 2009). Practices of historicization in the United States therefore emerged in support of efforts to maintain class associations and racial hierarchies, giving momentum to a period of intense repression in the early nineteenth

century. Wallace describes the repressive tactics as inextricably linked to conceptions of American history:

The viciousness of the time - the crushing of strikes, the raids on radical parties, the incarceration or deportation of critics, the support for lynch mobs and vigilantism - was fueled in large measure by the bourgeoisie's conviction that it was defending not simply class privilege but an historic legacy. (68)

The symbolic power of an imagined American past became a weapon against popular uprisings and civil and worker's rights campaigns, at the same time that it was leveraged in service of an ideological campaign of Americanization, which sought to homogenize American identity on several plains. Wallace concludes that this ideological tendency "culminated in 1917-1919 when the U.S. bourgeoisie, terrified by the Bolshevik victory and then the postwar strike wave, transmuted Americanization into a xenophobic and anti-left demand for 100% Americanism" (68). The forcefulness of the demand for Americanism was expressed in the imagery of the American melting pot: a crucible of assimilation whose purpose was to suppress difference, as well as to repress outrage at the material effects of hierarchized citizenship.

### **Museums as National Curriculum**

When George Brown Goode, a late 19th century administrator at the Smithsonian Institution described the purpose of museums in 1896, he suggested that their primary function was to preserve "material objects which are associated with events in the history of individuals, nations or races, or which illustrate their condition at different periods in their national life" (210). This statement brings to light two significant

assumptions related to the NMAH. Firstly, he assumes that history museums should bear an intimate and obvious relationship to national identity. Secondly, he asserts that exhibiting history consists of the grouping together of “different periods” into a coherent narrative. As one of the founders of the American Historical Association in the late 19th century, Goode brought a strong sense of the nationalist purpose of history museums to his approach to his work at the Smithsonian Institution. For Goode, the properly administered museum was one in which objects were organized as though they were chapters in a book, with each new segment beginning where the previous one concluded, all with a view to creating a sense of purpose and progress connected to national identity. In this framework, the history museum becomes an itinerary, bringing visitors from one period to the next, and culminating at a defined, predictable moment through which past events are logical and intelligible.

Museum-going, a practice that is largely synonymous with contemporary public education in the United States, has itself become a kind of ritual in its own right, with visits to the nation’s capital and the museums of the Smithsonian Institution in particular forming a standard excursion for school-aged children. As Eric Hobsbawm argued in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), the element of repetition is a central feature of invented traditions, those practices of a “ritual or symbolic nature” which imply a “continuity with the past” (1). Hobsbawm argues that invented traditions are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition” (2). Although museum-going has become entrenched in the national practices of the United States, the development of the



historical museum has had a complex trajectory. The focus on shedding the constraints of the past that characterized the American Revolution meant that a straightforward reverence of history would be difficult for American museums. This infatuation with innovation and change carried with it a tacit suspicion of the past, complicating the project of memorialization, as well as the work of institutions concerned with history. As the Revolutionary generation began to dwindle, the emergence of historical societies in Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania began, along with the collecting and conservation of objects deemed to be of importance to the nascent American national identity. With the deep chasm in American society left in the wake of the Civil War, the unease around how to represent American history grew. Discordant views on how to tell American history exacerbated tensions between state and federal historical projects.

The early discourse surrounding the establishment of the National Museum of American History highlights the distinct relationship between the Smithsonian Institution and the project of American nation-building. The tensions that lie at the foundation of the National Museum of American History reveal the political and social currents that have shaped the approach of the Smithsonian Institution to the very concept of history itself. The National Museum of American History was first opened in 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology (MHT). The museum's first administrator, Frank Taylor, had envisioned a museum that could showcase American technological prowess at the same time as it could demonstrate the role played by technology and innovation in America's history. Trained as an engineer, Taylor had initially joined the Smithsonian's Mechanical Technology department in 1922, where his interest in a museum focussed

on technology first began. In the 1950s, with the pressure of the Cold War urging evermore impressive demonstrations of American technological capability, Taylor's concept gained traction in Congress, with an act authorizing the establishment of the museum signed into law in 1955 under President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Swank 91). The patriotic tone of Taylor's appeal was echoed by Smithsonian Secretary Leonard Carmichael, who in a speech to Congress argued that the museum was an urgently needed response to the Russian claim that the whole of the Kremlin would be transformed into a museum (American History). Importantly, neither Taylor nor Carmichael's initial proposals for the museum included the element of history. Rather, the historical element was incorporated in the final planning stages, largely to attend to a need to relieve the overcrowded Smithsonian Arts & Industries Museum of some of its collection. In a sense, the uncomfortable relationship between history and technology that began during the museum's establishment persisted well throughout the first three decades of the museum's existence.

The Museum of History and Technology embodied the tension between the past and the potential of the future, specifically through its seemingly contradictory emphases on science and innovation on the one hand, for example through the placement of a three-story high Foucault pendulum in the entry hall, and on relics of the past, symbolized most strikingly by the preservation of the Star Spangled Banner (see fig. 1). It was not until 1980 that the MHT was renamed as the National Museum of American History, in a move that sought to "better represent its basic mission - the collection, care and study of objects that reflect the experience of the American people"

(NMAH). With its renaming, the NMAH became a museum that was both American in scope - through its representation of the history of America - but also, and perhaps most importantly, national in nature, through its relationship to the Smithsonian Institution. The NMAH therefore plays the complicated role of collecting, preserving and exhibiting a federally-sanctioned approach to American history.



[Fig. 6: The Foucault pendulum displayed alongside the Star Spangled Banner. The pendulum was removed from the NMAH in 1998.]

At the time of its opening, the NMAH was the sixth Smithsonian Institution building to open on the National Mall (Smithsonian Institution Archives). The building constructed initially for the MHT contributed to the growing presence of the Smithsonian Institution on the Mall, making a considerable visual impact on the built environment

with its imposing marble structure. Designed by the architectural firm McKim, Mead & White, the building was designed at the intersection of the classical architecture that dominated the earlier Smithsonian buildings, and the clean, sharp lines of modern design that were intended to denote technological progress and innovation (“The Museum’s Architecture”). The design of the building thus marked a point of departure in the architectural syntax of the Smithsonian, paving the way for the design and construction of decidedly modernist buildings such as those housing the Hirshhorn Museum (completed in 1974) and the National Air and Space Museum (completed in 1976). The building’s design is a literalization of the continued discomfort that surrounds the NMAH’s relationship to history.



[Fig. 7: In the foreground, the building housing the current-day National Museum of American History, originally opened in 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology. The surrounding buildings are emblematic of the classical style common to many buildings located on and around the National Mall.]

While the NMAH has developed its historical voice through both exhibition and archival activities, it remains a site of ambivalence towards certain troubling histories. As such, the histories that persist in troubling American historiography - those of settler colonialism, enslavement, and ongoing injustice - are often relegated to other museums within the national museum complex, namely the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). While both the NMAI and the NMAAHC offer critical spaces that can expand the possibilities of how national museums might engage with the past, present and future, the sequestering of these troubling histories results in a clear message: that they are set apart from the national story.

### **Studying the NMAH**

How ought we study the NMAH? At the intersection of museum studies and cultural studies, museum analysis finds itself in a conundrum. As Simon Knel (2007) has noted, while scholars whose fields are understood as being external to museum studies have recognized the “performative qualities of the museum - its poetic contributions to knowledge and reality as configurations of belief”, this approach, to a large extent, has not permeated museum practice itself. Museum practitioners, argues Knel, “continue to work within museum definitions which unreasonably constrain institutional conceptualization and contradict the subjective realities of museum provision” (4). How, then, can we bring perspectives considered “external” to museum studies to bear on museum practice?

In approaching the study of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, the question of performance can offer a helpful point of departure. Though critiques mounted over the past few decades by museum publics and scholars concerning the inclusivity of the museum have been met, to varying degrees, with changes in approaches to content and curation, the broader understanding of the museum as an authoritative institution has largely gone unchallenged. Yet, as Knell points out, the manner in which museums contribute to our “sense of a knowable and reproducible reality” depends on the capacity of the museum to perform its authority (5). Reality and performance, argues Knell, “can never be disassociated” within the museum (5). Ultimately, the study of performative authority within national museums might not have as its goal the undoing of museological performativity. Rather, the potential of engaging with this performativity can deepen our understanding of the effects produced by museums on objects, audiences, constituents, histories, present moments and possible futures.

## Chapter Four

### Telling One Nation's Story

The idea of national unity is perhaps one of the most fundamental concepts in the mythology of the United States. The symbolic power of this unity is embedded in the Pledge of Allegiance, enshrined in the nation's motto *E pluribus unum*, and forms the basis of the narrative of Lincoln's legacy. The reference to a singular nation in the title of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) echoes this assertion, and through its acknowledgement of the "many voices" that constitute the singular nation, functions to obfuscate the reality of the national fracturedness that it names. As Jon Stratton and Ien Ang (1994) have argued, the nation "can assume symbolic force precisely insofar as it is represented as a unity" (124). National singularity then, is something on which the very idea of the nation depends. Given this dependence on the concept of unity, historical exhibits, especially those located in national museums, face a discursive problem that they struggle to overcome. How can museums represent the manyness that is foundational to an account of place and space, while doing so in a manner that leaves the concept of national unity untouched? As Stratton and Ang point out, "national unity is always ultimately impossible precisely because it can only be represented as such through a suppression and repression, symbolic or otherwise, of difference" (124). In this

formulation, difference exists as the antithesis of the nation; its opposite; the primary obstacle to the nation's unchallenged existence.

The idea of national unity reverberates throughout the Smithsonian Institution, even as it rubs against conflicting claims of Indigenous nationhood in its museums, exhibits and policies. In its reference to a singular nation, the title of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit points to a central conflict in the work of the National Museum of American History: as the nation's museum, the NMAH must represent the history of North America in terms that attend both to the fact of colonisation, as well as to the need to foreground the inevitability of the nation referenced in the exhibit's title. Even as it points to this conflict, the exhibit's title also forecloses the possibility of national recognition of Indigenous nations: as the title makes clear, though there may be multiple voices within its borders, there is, ultimately, only one legitimate nation. Beginning with a section called "Unsettling the Continent", it is clear that the exhibit seeks to attend to some of the tensions inherent in representing a colonial narrative, and yet, by situating the starting point of the national story in 1492, the exhibit opens by replicating the pattern of national storytelling that positions colonial contact as the point of narrative departure.

As a cornerstone institution in the Smithsonian national museum complex, the NMAH encompasses the tensions inherent in balancing the needs of museum constituents against the perceived desires of museum audiences. As Miranda Brady has suggested in her work on the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), efforts to redress some of the central concerns of Indigenous communities as



the museum was being established made only partial inroads into the larger questions surrounding museological practice at the Smithsonian. Brady argues that the 1989 National Museum of the American Indian Act, and the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act took “years of activism to denaturalize the dominant culture’s understanding of human remains as cultural patrimony”, largely because such understandings had been confirmed by centuries of colonial discourse and museological practice (134). While the effects produced by both pieces of legislation have responded to many of the issues around representation, museum governance and repatriation, the process failed, in Brady’s view, to question the underlying principles that undergird the national museum complex as a whole (135). As such, certain practices within the Smithsonian were disrupted, while leaving the authority of the national museum complex intact.

The *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit showcases the impulse to call into question what Brady refers to as a “problematized past”, while protecting the naturalized presence of the national museum complex, and the National Museum of American History more specifically (137). While the exhibit’s constituents include the many communities and histories displayed in the exhibit, the exhibit’s assumed audience is less explicitly identified. Although constituent communities exert influence over many displayed museum objects and their accompanying textual interpretations, the assumed audience likewise applies pressures that constrain and shape museum exhibits. Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (2010) argues that museum visitors are “active interpreters who selectively construct meaning based on their personal experiences, associations,

biases, and sense of identity” (141). Despite the changing understandings of museum audiences that attend to the meaning-making processes of museum visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006; Everett & Barrett, 2009), without a concurrent effort to de-center hegemonic concepts of identity, the assumed identity of museum-goers is likely to be at odds with the constituents whose narratives are represented in the museum space, especially in the case of exhibits that contend with narratives of social difference and belonging.

Amid the tensions at play in balancing the needs and desires of museum constituents and museum visitors, how does an institution such as the NMAH tell the story of the nation’s founding, while attempting to recount the stories of those whose relationships with the nation have been coloured by racism, colonial violence, expropriation, indentureship and enslavement? As Patricia Pierce Erikson (2008) notes, the politics of knowledge-making within the Smithsonian is always intimately and inescapably tied to its national character, making the project of decolonizing the “Nation’s Attic” a complex undertaking. As Erikson concludes, the Smithsonian cannot therefore be the “ultimate point of decolonisation”, though it continues to represent a critical platform for the reexamination of American museology (77). The Smithsonian is positioned as having to speak on behalf of the nation on the one hand, even while its curators, collectors and critics push its practices to engage with contestatory meanings of nation and identity. The funding structure of the Smithsonian further entangles it with the structures of the national government, as the bulk of the institution’s funding comes from federal appropriations, all of which must be approved by the United States

Congress on an annual basis. As Moira Simpson (1996) notes, the Smithsonian, despite its efforts to consult constituent communities, is distinct from both tribal and community museums. It is profoundly national in character, responding to the forces at work in the nation to whom it belongs, in both thematic and economic terms.

In approaching the analysis of this exhibit, I brought a heightened attentiveness to the question of settlement, and how it would be described and represented in both the physical exhibit and the correlating anthology of texts. I wanted to look closely at how *Many Voices* would balance the seemingly competing obligations towards different stakeholders, constituents, and audiences, and in particular, how the physical exhibit and exhibit anthology would engage in these questions alongside one another. I was further concerned with how descriptions of Indigenous communities in America's past were brought into conversation with contemporary understandings of social difference in the United States, and whether the question of colonisation would be looked upon as belonging to the nation's past, or as an ongoing process connected to its present and future. The opening section of the *Many Voices* exhibit brings to light tensions between constituents and audiences, collections and communities, and national identities and local histories. Entitlement, belonging and identity are themes that are represented throughout the language of the exhibit panels, as well as in the very objects chosen to punctuate the exhibit's narrative.

## **A story beginning in 1492**

The choice to begin the account of the early history of the United States in the year 1492 is consequential, even if consistent with the structure of museological narratives about the European colonisation of America. Attention to pre-colonial history has perhaps been one of the greatest challenges put to the Smithsonian Institution since the establishment of the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989, before which representations of this period were relegated to the National Museum of Natural History, rather than taken up in the context of expanded histories of the United States. Frederick Hoxie (2008) identifies several thematic trends that permeate American engagements with Indigenous history. Hoxie argues that historical narratives that engage with Indigenous pasts in the United States tend to focus on three main questions: firstly, “Did the United States deal fairly with American Indians?”, second, “Were Native cultures crushed by the onslaught of US expansion, or were Indians active agents who affected and shaped the larger course of American history?”, and lastly, “What is the relationship between modern Native communities and either their precontact ancestors (are they authentically ‘Indian’?), or other racialized minorities?” (1154). Hoxie concludes that “historians have difficulty viewing American Indian topics apart from the history of the American nation state” (1154). The result of the overemphasis on these three themes is that Indigenous history is engaged with along two main axes: either history should assuage the collective settler conscience, or it should condemn the actions of the state in relation to Indigenous peoples. In either case, Indigenous history is engaged with only insofar as it intersects with the

present-day concerns of the United States, rather than as a field of knowledge in its own right. The effect of this approach is to confirm that, while Indigenous history might be “interesting”, it is ultimately of little import to American history writ large. As Hoxie further points out:

The Indian role in this story is to resist, adapt, negotiate, endure and persist. Native peoples accomplish these tasks in modern scholarship with far more dignity than was granted them a generation ago, but their range of activity (and the historians’ range of vision) remains contained by the all-encompassing, intersecting narratives of modernity and the ‘rise’ of the nation. (1154)

In several ways, the “Unsettling the Nation” section of the *Many Voices* exhibit replicates this pattern, even as it attempts to represent the experiences of Indigenous people with “dignity”, to use Hoxie’s term. Using 1492 as the unquestioned starting point for the story of the United States intertwines the national story with that of European settlement, and forecloses the possibility of an Indigenous past outside of the colonial encounter.

The title “Unsettling the Continent” seems at first to provide a counterpoint to the conventional idea of settlement as a process involving the building and construction of a society. First, by placing an emphasis on “*unsettlement*”, the corresponding text asserts that “the continent’s population actually declined during this period...”, a fact that contradicts the conception of settlement as having focussed on population growth (Unsettling). Secondly, it references a “continent”, rather than a nation, and in doing so evokes the expansive territories that had been home to Indigenous nations for millenia. In these ways, the framing of this section of the exhibit stands in contrast to the emphasis on nation that typically forms the point of departure for so many exhibits about

national history. Yet despite the rhetorical impact of recasting the colonial period as an undoing of what came before it, the exhibit avoids representing the pre-colonial continent as one that was shared by several Indigenous nations at the time of colonisation. As a result, what emerges is an account of Indigenous history that exists as a counterpart to the story of European settlement in the Americas, rather than a history in its own right, punctuated by different dates, battles and milestones that do not always align with those referenced in American national narratives.

The first text in the “Unsettling the Continent” section of the anthology opens with an essay by Barbara Clark Smith, a curator in the Division of Political History at the NMAH. Smith’s argument in the opening essay engages primarily with the question of “unsettlement”, which she proposes as a terminological shift that responds to the focus on “settlement” that is so often the starting point for accounts of American history. The essay details the relationship of dominant foundation myths, such as the one surrounding Plymouth Rock, to the divergent experiences of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans under colonialism. Language is the primary vector of her intervention in this opening essay, and she extends her critique to the term “settler”, referring to them instead as “European migrants” who arrived in North America “in search of adventure or economic gain” (27). Describing the European perception that the land they encountered was untamed, uninhabited and uncultivated, Smith writes that English newcomers built villages “in what they saw as a wilderness”, a perception shaped by the contrast between life in Europe, and the landscape they encountered in North America (27). Accounts of the hardships endured by settlers as they struggled to survive in a

land perceived as inhospitable permeate the founding narrative of the United States, explaining the role that settlement came to play in the founding national narrative of the nation.

Smith proposes a multi-vocal approach to the founding stories of the United States, setting the stage for the essays that follow hers. Inviting readers to revisit their assumptions about what constitutes an “American” foundation story, Smith asks: “Can we accommodate a messy and multifaceted founding era, one that defies our impulse to untangle and isolate a single thread in order to deem it more essentially American than others?” (38). For Smith, there is an additional terminological tension that surrounds the use of the term “American” to designate all inhabitants of the United States, and she suggests that we “need a new word for inhabitants of the United States created in 1776” that allows for increased precision around the use of the terms “American” and “North American” (38). Smith argues that such a term - she proposes “US-ian” - would provide a distinction between the people and histories proper to the United States as established in 1776, and leave available the use of the terms American and North American for descriptions of the hemisphere and continent. The conflation of the term American with US-ian, argues Smith, stems from the post-American Revolution tendency to “reduce America to a single national and racial story” (39). Smith offers as an example a creamware pitcher produced in Britain in 1795 that features a transfer print in which a woman representing America is seen instructing two Indigenous Americans by pointing to portraits of significant European and American figures<sup>3</sup>. The

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<sup>3</sup> The transferred image draws inspiration from a print made by British publisher and printer John Fairburn called *The Emblem of America*. The pitcher is characteristic of earthenware produced in Britain (typically in Liverpool and Staffordshire) for an emerging American market hungry for nationalist paraphernalia in

image on the pitcher, appearing under a banner that reads “The Emblem of America”, consolidates the relationship between “America” and European whiteness, and serves to superimpose Europeans as the rightful inhabitants and guardians of America.

Although this pitcher actually appears in the second section of the exhibit, Smith’s reference to it at the beginning of the anthology provides a point of entry into a critique of whiteness that the physical exhibit does not offer.

Smith concludes her text by asking whether American histories can be teased apart from US-ian ones, allowing us to “locate the US more accurately in the changing and capacious context of other American histories” (39). The opening essay of the anthology thus closes with an important assertion about American historiography: that the idea of social mixity and transformation lies at the heart of the American experience, especially when the broader view of “American” is taken in favor of the more narrowly-defined “US-ian”. Smith argues that “the learning of new languages, openness to new beliefs and new alliances, creative redefinitions of self, resistances both large and small to the imperatives of empire...” all constitute a central theme in the American story (40). As an introduction to the three other essays in the “Unsettling the Continent” section, Smith’s text invites readers to approach the concept of settlement from a broad lens, one that calls into question the narrative appropriations of this time period that have pervaded consensus historiography.

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the wake of the American Revolution. While the exact location and date of production for this particular vessel is not known, most pitchers of this type were produced between 1790 and 1820.



## **Whose objects? Whose collections?**

The deep epistemological and methodological questions that emerged with the establishment of the NMAI and the subsequent restructuring of the Anthropology Department at the National Museum of Natural History, are surfaced in the *Many Voices* exhibit. The “Unsettling the Nation” section provides a window into the tension between an institutional heritage in which Indigenous history was a purely anthropological enterprise, and a contemporary impulse to establish relationships with constituent Indigenous communities, largely manifested in the governance structure of the NMAI. The repatriation of hundreds of ceremonial objects and human remains held in Smithsonian collections marked a difficult shift for the institution, in which previously-held conceptions of Indigenous remains and objects as mere ‘artifacts’ were disrupted. A veritable crisis took root within the Smithsonian, in which concerns about the ability of the institution to produce knowledge and preserve objects for the public good were pitted against plans to establish a model of governance for the NMAI that would include Indigenous perspectives on collection and preservation, as well as make provisions for Indigenous groups to govern the use of their objects by researchers and museum professionals, including asking for their return.

The tensions that emerged in relation to the expanding conversations about the importance of repatriation were undoubtedly felt most pointedly by curators in the Department of Anthropology at the NMNH, whose collections of skeletal remains and ceremonial burial items has formed the kernel of the repatriation debates surrounding the establishment of the NMAI. In a 1987 letter to his colleagues in the Department of

Anthropology at the NMNH, curator Ives Goddard outlined his concerns about the potential consequences of a turn towards repatriation at the Smithsonian. For Goddard, the very concept of repatriation ran contrary to what he understood the mission of the museum to be. He argued that the “permanent physical removal of items in the National collections and their interment where they cannot be studied is irresolvably antithetical to the mission of the Smithsonian. It would be a violation of our charter and of our sacred trust for any Smithsonian resources to be devoted to such a purpose” (Goddard). Crucially, opposition to legislation that would enable Indigenous communities to repatriate remains and objects was the only response envisaged by Goddard at that stage:

The only way the Smithsonian can discharge its obligations in the present circumstances is to insure that a vigorous resistance is mounted against any proposal to alienate any part of the National collections under outside pressure, and to mount a vigorous campaign to educate Congress and the American public about the value of any parts of the National collections that are threatened.

Goddard’s instructive comments offer a window into how the terms of the conflict took shape: the objects in the collection, regardless of their provenance, belong to the National collections, whereas the “pressure” to reconsider their ownership is definitively situated as coming from “outside” the institution. The insider/outsider logic on which his comments rely, echoes the terms that variously situate Indigenous communities as ‘belonging to’ the nation, while at the same time being positioned as ‘outside’ of the national body. The effects of the repatriation debate on the internal culture of the Smithsonian Institution were extreme, leading curators from across the organization to wrestle with the very mission of the institution. The establishment of the NMAI and its

corresponding practices are therefore intimately connected with methods and approaches for recounting American history in other museums that are part of the Smithsonian Institution.

The preservation and display of sacred Indigenous objects by the Smithsonian has formed one of the central areas of struggle and transformation within the institution, as it responded to the tensions laid bare by the process of establishing the NMAI, and worked to implement protocols that would put museum practices in alignment with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Ronald Grimes (1990) introduces the term “object-being” as a way of describing the living nature of Indigenous objects, and the particular needs and meanings they take on in museum spaces. Grimes points out that within their cultures of origin, many objects understood to possess a form of life force are either eventually “returned to the elements, or kept alive with use” (254). While the Cultural Resource Center<sup>4</sup> established alongside the NMAI has provisions for the ritual care of objects, repatriation presents a different set of challenges for museology when its purpose is to allow objects to decompose or decay - or in other words, to die.

The repatriation of Indigenous objects is therefore not uniquely a question of ownership, though authority and agency are certainly key issues. More precisely, the repatriation of Indigenous objects pits divergent perspectives on preservation against one another. Grimes further argues that when museums “control humidity, install glass

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<sup>4</sup> The Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland was established as a corollary institution to the main NMAI museum. The mission of the Cultural Resources Center is to serve as an “accessible environment for Native and non-Native visitors from tribal, academic, cultural, educational, and artistic communities and organizations” , serving as the “museum's focal point for sharing expertise and training the next generation of museum professionals, especially Native Americans” (Cultural Resources Center).

to filter out the sun's rays because they fade colors, and encase objects in glass, we in effect deny both life and death to a sacred item" (254). Although the NMAI elaborated a series of practices designed to address the life-cycle of the objects in their collection, as an arm of the Smithsonian Institution, its objects are occasionally loaned for display purposes to other Smithsonian Institution museums, as in the case of the *Many Voices* exhibit. The Indigenous interpretive voice that has been a central feature of the curatorial approach of the NMAI is not always replicated when objects are loaned to other institutions. In short, the objects may travel between museums, without their interpretive context in tow. The inclusion of several items from the NMAI collection in the *Many Voices* exhibit raises the question of how to extend the policies and practices of one museum within the Smithsonian complex to others, especially where Indigenous objects are concerned.

### **Situating the Physical Exhibit**

My analysis begins with a close reading of the physical exhibit, as well as a comparison with the exhibit's anthology - a series of texts written by scholars and museum professionals, developed in relation to the exhibit and mirroring its thematic pattern, but diverging from its content in certain areas. As a textual companion to the physical exhibit, the anthology serves as a variation on the form of an exhibit catalogue. Rather than simply chronicling the exhibit, the anthology acts as a scholarly companion, offering analysis and context about its themes. Certain texts in the anthology closely follow their corresponding sections of the physical exhibit, while others diverge quite

dramatically in their scope. Of each register of the exhibit, I ask how the issues of difference, whiteness and belonging are explored.

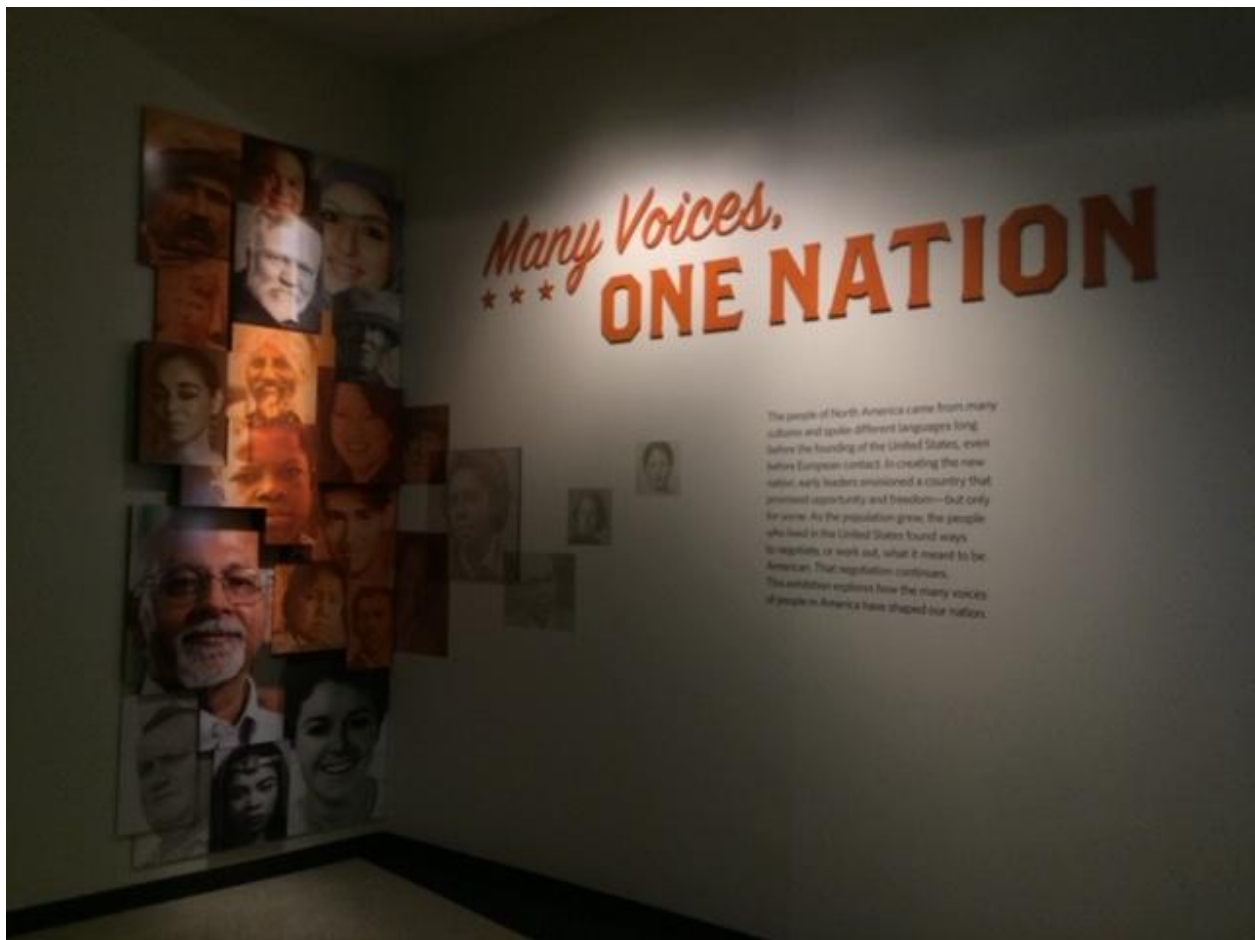
Housed in an exhibit space called the Hall of the American People, the *Many Voices* exhibit oscillates between an insistence on the plurality of identities implicated in the American past, at the same time that it insists on the singularity of the nation and people whose story it recounts. Upon approaching the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, museum visitors are greeted by a large window display that features a question: “How did we become US?”. Underneath the question, four displayed objects are associated with four statements intended to answer the question. A Plains Indian umbilical charm presented to President Ulysses S. Grant in the 1870s appears alongside the statement “Some of Us Were Already Here”. Next to it, the statement “Some of Us Came Here Voluntarily” is on a placard behind which a large replica of the Statue of Liberty stands, having possibly been used in a train station around 1900. Positioned in front of the statue are a pair of shackles from 19th century Puerto Rico, held on a placard that reads “Some of Us Were Forcibly Brought Here”. Finally, an early 19th century Pueblo devotional image of the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Guadalupe is hung alongside the statement “Some of Us Remained In Place as the United States Expanded to Our Land”. The four statements culminate in an invitation to museum visitors to “Discover How Diverse Peoples Built A Nation Together”.



[Fig. 8: Introductory display case for the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2019.]

The words “Hall of the American People” hover above the entryway to the exhibit, where the title and introductory text are displayed alongside a collage-style amalgam of portraits of various unnamed people. Some of the photographs are black and white, while many are sepia in color, and others still are presented in full color. The variance in shades of the photographs, together with the mix of faces representing a range of different identities (men and women, white and non-white, young and old), is reminiscent of the visual language of what Angela Davis (1996) has called the

“spectacle” of multiculturalism (45). The introductory text<sup>5</sup> further reflects the language of state multiculturalism by describing the American story as one that incorporates “many voices” involved in a “negotiation” about American identity. Jon Stratton and Len Ang (1994) have described the tendency of multiculturalism to “freeze the fluidity of identity” by synthesizing them into a form of “unity-in-diversity” (22). Social difference is therefore represented in the introductory panels as a characteristic that is developed through the inclusion of “others” into the visual imagery of the nation.



[Fig. 9: Entryway introducing the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2019.]

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix for the full text from the introductory panel.

The first panel in the Unsettling the Continent section begins by contextualizing the term “unsettling”, describing the dramatic decline in the North American continent’s population during the 300 years following European contact. The panel concludes by pointing to a second understanding of the term “unsettling”, asserting that “Our world today grows out of this unsettling history”. The exhibit offers four areas of focus in its overview of colonial America: Spanish New Mexico, New France, Dutch New Amsterdam and British South Carolina, with each geographic location having a dedicated display case and a panel of explanatory text.

### **Spanish New Mexico**

This display case in the physical exhibit brings together photographs, ceramics, and religious paraphernalia from Spanish missions around New Mexico. The accompanying text describes the Indigenous communities present in the area before Spanish contact, together with their well-established methods of irrigation agriculture. The text indicates that the primary goal of the Spanish was to keep other European powers out of the region through the conversion of the Indigenous populations to Catholicism, and situates the Spanish colonial project in its economic context. The text points out that although many Indigenous peoples adopted Spanish as a language, they also found ways to resist Spanish demands for forced labor, and successfully defended many of their traditions and religious practices. In total, there are 10 objects displayed in this case, with a single explanatory paragraph working to provide cohesion to the displayed objects, and shorter object labels under the items in the case.



## **New France**

The display case dedicated to New France showcases a series of artistic renderings of native peoples drawn by early French explorers, along with a beaver pelt, beaded moccasins and religious items representing the influence of Jesuit missionaries. In the accompanying text, New France is described as a “middle ground” between the French and Indigenous communities, a place that formed the basis for the establishment of French-Indigenous alliances. Cast as a space of hybridity, the exhibit features the moccasins as an example of the cultural *metissage* that took place as a result of the relative equilibrium in the balance of power in the region, noting that “Neither group commanded enough power to make the other abide by its wishes”. The leather moccasins are exhibited alongside several drawings depicting hybridized fashion trends, in which European women are shown wearing native footwear and leggings, with European-style skirts and bodices. The marketing of moccasins themselves is pointed to by the exhibit text as having shaped the economic landscape in New France, as they became adopted by European settlers who found the footwear to be effective in withstanding local weather conditions. The emphasis in this section of the exhibit is on negotiation and compromise, with a further mention of the French woodsmen or *coureurs de bois* who adopted many Indigenous hunting practices, and often intermarried with Indigenous women. This intermingling would eventuate in the development of a new hybrid identity of the Métis, a political and social label that later formed the basis for political advocacy and resistance to the Canadian government in the mid-1800s.

## **Dutch New Amsterdam**

The next area of focus in this section of the exhibit explores Dutch New Amsterdam. Taking the “sale” of the island of Manhattan as the central element in the narrative of the Dutch colonial presence, the display brings together maps, portraits, wampum beads and artistic renditions of the flora and fauna of the area. On display is a photograph of a land grant signed by Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of New Netherland from 1647 until the colony was ultimately ceded to the British in 1664. The explanation of the land grant scheme under the Dutch sheds light into the nuances in the approach to colonisation taken by various European powers. The accompanying text describes how land was granted to settlers, allowing them to live, farm and trade on the plots, and discusses the manner in which land rights were sometimes granted to enslaved Africans brought to New Netherland by the Dutch West India Company. While slavery was a common practice in New Netherland, certain enslaved people were able to obtain partial freedom after a certain number of years, though their children were typically claimed by the Dutch West India Company as slaves. Baptism in the Dutch Reformed Church sometimes increased the probability of obtaining partial freedom, and while the Dutch colony was not as explicit as the Spanish in centering religious conversion in its project, religion nonetheless functioned as a point of negotiation between enslavers and the enslaved.

## **British South Carolina and British Pennsylvania**

The final sections of the exhibit pivots southward in its focus, in order to explore British South Carolina and British Pennsylvania. Beginning with a description of the British presence in South Carolina, the textual elements of the exhibit bring the history of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade to the fore. Having established a plantation settlement in South Carolina in the late 1600s, the accompanying text describes how the production of a single cash crop for export - in this instance rice - was the result of agricultural knowledge and innovation derived from enslaved West Africans that was modified by the British in order to adapt to the growing conditions in South Carolina's climate. The text positions the value of enslaved labor as central to the economic prosperity of the early colony, stating that "The labor of enslaved Africans guaranteed Carolina's economic success". Finally, we are also told that the processing of the rice, typically using a large wooden mortar and pestle, was women's work on the plantation just as it had been in West Africa, marking the first mention of the gendered nature of enslaved labor. A large wooden mortar and pestle appears in the display case, next to a 1915 photograph of an African American woman processing rice using similar tools.

Aside from the brief mention of the slave trade in the exhibit's opening panels, this display case forms the first in-depth engagement with the subject of the transatlantic slave trade. That the exhibit connects slavery with the British presence in North America in the first instance is telling indeed, and works to disturb the facile equating of slavery with a rebellious Southern mentality. Rather, establishing an early

association between slavery and the British serves to demonstrate that the underpinnings of the slave trade in the United States cannot be parsed out along the northern-southern divide as they so often are. The choice to showcase with British South Carolina complicates enduring notions of the British as ideological counterparts to the abolition of slavery in the American north, and thus rattles the facile explanations of the American Civil War that so often lead to reductive ideas about to whom the original sin of slavery should be ascribed. Lastly, the text provides some important demographic information about British South Carolina, indicating that by the early 1700s, African Americans formed the majority in the settlement, with white Europeans forming the minority. By taking up the designations of “minority” and “majority” - with their powerful and persistent symbolism - the exhibit text pulls apart the contemporary association between racialization and minority status, showing that the African majority in America predates the claim to whiteness as a majority condition in the United States.

The display dedicated to British Pennsylvania places a focus on the religious tolerance for which the state’s founder, William Penn, was known. The accompanying text begins by stating that Penn established Pennsylvania through “purchases and treaties with Native Americans”, a fact for which Penn is often recognized in historical accounts. James O’Neal Spady (2000) argues that at the root of the origin story of Pennsylvania lies a benevolent allegory of colonialism that has “obscured the significance of both the severe disruption of Lenape life that Pennsylvania created and the resistance of some Lenapes to that disruption” (20). This allegory, disseminated by Penn himself as well as artists and historians well into the twentieth century places an

exaggerated importance on Penn as the broker of a bloodless conquest of Native land. In its assertion of the honest exchange that laid the foundation for the establishment of Pennsylvania, the text overlooks any impact on the Native Americans whose land was obtained through the apparently humane ruse of colonial economics, while at the same time ignoring the intolerance and violence that would plague Native communities in the state throughout the eighteenth century.

The items displayed in relation to British Pennsylvania emphasize the influence of Quaker ideals on the state. A Quaker bonnet from the 1800s is shown in front of an eighteenth century artist's rendition of a Quaker gathering. The object panels for the bonnet and painting describe the persecution experienced by Quakers in England and at the hands of the Puritans in Massachusetts, where several Quakers were hanged for having preached. Alongside these items hangs an engraving of an adult baptism, with an explanation of the outsider status of the Baptists whose ban on infant baptism offended the Protestant communities of New England and the South.

A cartoon depicting Quakers and Native Americans riding on the backs of Scots-Irish and German immigrants is the only mention of the acrimonious relationship between Native Americans and European settlers. The 1764 cartoon represents the frustration of the Scots-Irish and German immigrants at the refusal of the Quakers to take military action against the Native Americans. The Conestoga Massacre of 1763 marked one instance of inflection in a longer string of violence against Native Americans at the hands of Scots-Irish frontiersmen - events which are entirely absent from the display, even where parallel events are described.



[Fig. 10: Cartoon by James Claypoole, 1763, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2019]

### **Metissage and Cultural Exchange**

While the physical exhibit provides a limited sense of the meaning of the objects displayed in the case, the associated article in the anthology hones in on two of the artifacts, offering a deeper reading of their context and significance. Written by cultural historian Ramon Gutierrez, “Exploring the Colonial History of New Mexico Through Artifacts” begins with a tale of two objects: a painting of Saint Anthony of Padua on an elk-skin hide, and an iron spur. The relatedness of the two objects, writes Gutierrez, is not readily apparent, making of them what archeologists refer to as “dumb traces”, whose importance and symbolism requires interpretation in order to be made explicit (45). Gutierrez goes on to situate the two artifacts within the history of Spanish colonial conquest in the Americas, initiated by the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, and culminating in the expansion of the Spanish Empire from Chile in the south to New Mexico and Arizona in the north, and from Cuba all the way to the Philippines. Drawing

from the work of geographer Alfred B. Crosby, Gutierrez characterizes the cultural effects of Spanish colonialism as a “Columbian exchange”, in which a “set of reciprocal transfers of ideas, technologies and goods created an infinite array of blendings and borrowings, of mixings and meldings, of inventions and wholesale appropriations that were often unique and specific to time and place” (46). The language of reciprocity in this early passage notwithstanding, Gutierrez continues by describing the push and pull of attack and revolt that marked the period of Spanish colonial conquest in the Americas. The impact of equestrian warfare, for example, is one instance of “exchange” in which Indigenous appropriations of Spanish military strategy resulted in a victory for the Pueblo people in a 1680 revolt against Spanish colonial rule (47). Within the conflict over land and resources between Indigenous populations and Spanish colonists, Gutierrez points to conflicts between clergy and colonists, whose often conflicting goals put them in competition over Indigenous labor and products. While the stated goal of Spanish colonialism was the Christianization of the Indigenous peoples under Spanish rule, Gutierrez argues that the ambitions of the often self-funded colonists were economic in nature, pitting their interest in accumulating individual wealth, against the interests of the Church, who instead wanted indentured Indigenous labor harnessed for the building of churches and missions (49). Gutierrez paints a portrait of competing interests, describing the tensions between the clergy and the colonists as wealth was syphoned out of the Americas towards Spain by the Crown.

Crucially, the painting of Saint Anthony of Padua on the elk-skin hide and the iron spur are the only two objects explored in Gutierrez’ text. True to his opening argument

that objects require interpretation in order to elucidate their meaning, Gutierrez chooses to use the objects as points of entry into a deeper exploration of the competition of forces and metissage of cultures in colonial New Mexico. In Gutierrez's account, the painting of Saint Anthony becomes a piece of evidence of Franciscan manipulation of the important role that animals played in Pueblo spirituality. The painting of a saint on the hide of an elk - an animal of central importance to the Pueblo as a source of food and sustenance, is indicative in Gutierrez's account of Franciscan skill at deciphering the psychology of the Pueblo. Having ascertained the power of animal hides in Pueblo spirituality, the Franciscans "did everything possible to fuse the iconography of the cult of the saints with images of Pueblan animals and their spiritual embodiment, or their hides" (53). Gutierrez interprets the painting as a calculated attempt to steer Indigenous peoples toward Christianity, suggesting that the painting and its canvas was a means of ensuring that "wayward souls would surely be led to Jesus Christ" (53). In contrast to the use of the elk hide, Gutierrez uses the iron spur to tell the story of equestrian warfare - a military strategy introduced by the Spanish that assisted them in overthrowing the Aztec Empire in 1521.





[Fig. 11: Painting of Saint Anthony of Padua on elk-skin hide, c. early 1700s, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2020.]

Within the landscape of the settlement of New Mexico described by Gutierrez, considerable space is allocated to the forceful resistance to the Spanish mounted by the Pueblo Indians. Citing the brutal conditions under which the Indigenous population lived, Gutierrez describes the context leading to the Pueblo uprisings that took place in 1680. With the Kingdom of New Mexico having been governed erratically from 1598-1680 and “exploiting the Indigenous population mercilessly, controlling them with brute force, and,

thus, creating the conditions that sparked the Pueblo Revolt..." (51). Using knowledge of equestrian warfare gained through battle with the Spanish, the Pueblo mounted a forceful attack, succeeding in pushing the Spanish southward to present-day El Paso, Texas. Despite attempts to regain control of New Mexico, the area remained under Pueblo rule for 12 years before being reconquered by the Spanish in 1692. In addition to his description of Indigenous resistance efforts, Gutierrez further grounds the Spanish efforts to reconquer New Mexico in an economic analysis, arguing that the abundant production of silver from mines in New Mexico drove the Spanish endeavor to recapture it (52). With British and French settlements appearing along the westward shores of the Mississippi, the Spanish were eager to protect the mines, as well as the Indigenous labor used to extract the silver. The story of the Kingdom of New Mexico as recounted by Gutierrez is thus one that foregrounds the economic imperative, leveraging it as the impetus for Spanish colonial expansion. Although he notes that the explicit purpose of colonisation was the Christianization of Indigenous populations, he maintains that the precious metals that filled the coffers of the Spanish monarchy for centuries were the central factor motivating the Spanish.

The stark contrast between the treatment of the objects in the physical exhibit and the analysis of the corresponding article in the anthology raises important questions about how we encounter museum objects. Specifically, the divergence in methodologies between the two registers of the exhibit brings to the fore critical issues surrounding the use of objects in telling (or re-telling) national histories. To make use of James Clifford's (1997) term "contact zones" as a way of understanding the exhibit space, we can trace

the effects of dominant interpretations of American history and identity as they work to incorporate objects into a national narrative. The elk skin-skin hide and the iron spur - objects that are displayed in the physical exhibit with little context or analysis, emerge in the anthology as objects whose meanings are as much anti-colonial as they are colonial. Conversely, the interpretive paucity of the physical exhibit relegates the objects to the category of “American”, even as the anthology proposes an understanding of them as counter-American.

The unequal terms on which the exchange between various constituencies takes place within the exhibit leaves the transformative potential of the museum as contact zone unexplored. Tony Bennett (1998) has remained critical of the potential of the contact zone framework, arguing that the concept functions as an extension of the state’s use of museums as mediators of social difference. Bennett argues that rather than opening up a space for liberatory forms of engagement between museums and their constituent communities, this form of participatory museology makes possible a new, benevolent narrative for the museum, whose institutional goals of disseminating “messages of cultural tolerance and diversity into civil society” remain unaltered (213).

Does the representation of the Spanish colonial project in the Americas in the *Many Voices* exhibit differ from the types of accounts that typically populate historical exhibitions? In the first instance, the geographic focus on New Mexico sets the approach of the exhibit apart, departing from the conventional focus on the eastern settlements established by the British. By bringing to light the circumstances surrounding the painting of Saint Anthony and the iron spur, Gutierrez notes that his aim

was to “delve into the history of an area not well known to the American public at large...” (53). In another sense, the focus on the history of New Mexico sheds light on a chapter in the history of the United States during which Indigenous resistance and the imperial presence of Spain figured prominently, both representing a departure from the religious, economic and colonial underpinnings of life in the first British colonies along the Eastern Seaboard. Gutierrez’s essay thus constitutes a change in orientation from the Puritan-centered narratives of American history towards one that foregrounds Indigenous resilience, Spanish influence, and the malleability of the southern border. At the same time as the anthology represents a compelling divergence from the conventional starting point for the American narrative, the physical exhibit grounds the objects in a familiar exhibitional pattern: a group of disparate objects assembled with limited attention to the elements that bind them together. Despite this, the geographic focus on New Mexico in the physical exhibit intervenes in the anticipated flow of the national narrative with its subtle disavowal of the Puritan-based mythos of the founding of the United States.

### **Voice and Narrative in the Display of Indigenous Objects**

An article written by Christopher Lindsay Turner, a Cultural Research Specialist at the NMAI, considers more closely some of the introductory objects used in the exhibit that were loaned to the National Museum of American History by the American Indian museum. Turner’s text, “Native American Objects of Memory and Journey from the National Museum of the American Indian” takes up the question of memory as it relates

to museum objects, and considers the misconception that Native American people had limited means of recording the events of their lives and societies until the introduction of writing and visual art by European settlers. Turner argues that the interpretation of Indigenous objects is often lacking in perspective, leading to the classification of objects according to their imagined use, rather than by their ceremonial or social significance. In exploring the concept of memory, Turner suggests that Indigenous objects often carry an additional layer of significance related to communal memory, and cannot be fully remembered through a reliance on individual memory alone (57). Contemplating the distinction between the concepts of memory and remembrance, Turner opens his text by asking "...is memory not history unwritten?" (57). Turner proposes to engage this question through an exploration of three objects from the NMAI collection loaned to the *Many Voices* exhibit: a Tsimshian headdress, a string of purple and white wampum beads, and hat known as a 'Glengarry cap' decorated Indigenous beadwork. Turner suggests approaching the study of the three objects from a Native American perspective, one that privileges an understanding of the objects as historical records in their own right.

Beginning with the Tsimshian crest hat from the Haida Gwaii Islands (previously the Queen Charlotte Islands, and listed in the exhibit by their former name), off the Northwestern coast of Canada, Turner describes the headdress as an example of an object whose purpose was to capture and retain a communal creation story. Here again, the focus on an object from the West Coast represents a critical geographic turn away from the conventional focus on the East Coast Indigenous. For Turner, this choice is

intentional, as it allows for a consideration of how the effects of settler colonialism impacted different Indigenous communities at different times. While the European settlement of the East Coast of North America began in earnest in the early 1600s, Turner points out that Indigenous people from regions such as the Pacific Northwest had another century or so of “relative isolation” (58). During this period, Turner suggests that the traditions of the Indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest “thrived, adapted and advanced”, allowing them to negotiate and resist the impacts of European settler colonialism in distinct ways. Using the Tsimshian headdress as a point of entry into the exploration of the significance of Indigenous objects is therefore a choice that foregrounds an approach that resists the tendencies of conventional historical narratives, and offers insight into the varied experiences of Indigenous communities in North America. In particular, Turner suggests that the objects and narratives of the Indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest offer insight into the strong relationship to the land that continues to fuel Indigenous land claims to this day.

The establishment of the NMAI and its collections involved a large-scale process of consultation with the various Indigenous communities whose objects were transferred from other Smithsonian Institution museums - namely the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), as well as those that were transferred from the George Gustav Heye collection that had been housed in the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. The consultation process was meant to elucidate information about the objects, at the same time that it helped determine what approaches to preservation and community were most appropriate. In the context of consultations such as these, Turner describes

the information that members of the Tsimshian First Nation were able to provide concerning the headdress and its symbolism, both historical and contemporary. While the headdress depicts a creation story, it more specifically represents the origin story of a clan, which forms the basis of the clan structures that continue to bring meaning to Tsimshian life today (59). In this sense, the connection to the clan structure represented by the headdress bridges the memory-history divide, resulting in what Turner describes as “remembered histories”, where recollection and historical narrative converge. This space of convergence interrupts the museological reliance on written historical narratives and European perspectives in the representation of American history, privileging instead the oral histories and communal memory of a community.

While the crest hats are often created in order to record the creation of a particular feature of the natural world or to commemorate a pivotal event in the life of a community such as the completion of a journey, this particular headdress was created in order to represent the origins of the Eagle clan, which traces its beginning to one of the Tsimshian Nation’s founders, Chief Lutguts’amti (59). Turner notes that the headdress combines several elements that are distinctive to the native relationship to many ceremonial objects: the story of the creation of a clan that is rooted in “a specific place in the landscape of North America”, and that further represents “an embodied way of recalling, giving thanks, and commemorating” the past (60). The storied explanation of the context surrounding the creation and use of the headdress that Turner provides supports his opening intervention: that Indigenous objects are historical records that carry a combination of information about place and community, and that an

understanding of the information they hold requires the interpretation of Indigenous communities themselves.

The second object represented in the chapter is a string of purple and white wampum, strung on twine. Created between 1750 and 1850, the wampum belonged to Mahican Chief John Wannuaucon Quinney, and relates a story of displacement and migration that took place over several stages. Wampum beads, which are made from drilled shells found on the Atlantic coast, were a valuable component in commercial trading for Indigenous communities along the Atlantic coast. After the arrival of the Dutch in the early 17th century, wampum became more broadly used in trading between Indigenous communities and the Dutch, who were hungry for access to animal furs and skins. Sometimes used as a mnemonic device, the beads might be held in the hand of a person relating a story as a reference tool. Crucially, the wampum often served the additional purpose of conveying a message, typically concerning an important event in the life of a community, such as the establishment of an alliance, or the completion of a journey. In the case of elaborate messages such as these, the beads were often woven into belts that communicated messages through a system of patterns and symbols (61). In the case of this particular string of wampum beads, it is likely that they were given to Wannuaucon Quinney shortly after the War of Independence, during a period of increasing competition for land, when Turner argues that many Americans “held the belief that the War of Independence had shifted the frontiers considerably” (62). Amid a heightened sense of precarity, Quinney was tasked by his elders to move their people further inland, to Wisconsin.



Against the backdrop of this story of dispossession and displacement, Turner returns to the question of the wampum's possible meanings. In the first instance, it likely represented a passing of leadership from older members of the tribe to the younger Quinney. It is also possible that the wampum was a means of preserving a component of the tribe's story, a record that would be invaluable over the following decades, during which time the tribe would contend with the forced dispossession of Indigenous communities as part of the "most deliberate and sustained policy of the American government to obtain full title to the remainder of their lands east of the Mississippi" (62). While the set of policies and processes known as "Indian Removal" often figure in accounts of American history, Turner points out that less often discussed are the effects of this process on tribes from the Eastern seaboard, whose trajectories often took the form of mass migration in several stages over a protracted period of time. As a result of the staggered nature of these trajectories, Turner writes that "community recovery" was difficult, due to the overwhelming instability and insecurity brought about by the temporary occupation of parcels of land as they moved from place to place (62). Quinney ultimately settled his tribe in Shawano County, Wisconsin in 1850, by which time most other eastern tribes would have lost nearly all of their lands to "piecemeal sales" or cessions by treaty with the United States (62). Turner describes Quinney's negotiations with the government, which included at least three visits to Washington, D.C. over the course of several years. The negotiation process would eventuate in Quinney drafting the first tribal constitution for the Mahican, as well as his acceptance of American citizenship, which many Mahican reluctantly accepted alongside him.

In the course of these negotiations, Quinney was also the recipient of a presidential peace medal, several of which were given to various Indigenous leaders involved in negotiations deemed to have been 'successful' by the American government. During a final visit to Washington, Quinney agreed that the Mahican would relocate to a different tract of land, in a settlement that would allow them to remain principally Mahican, rather than citizens of the United States. Turner's description of Quinney's diplomatic efforts reveals a story of resistance and reluctance, in which the allure of negotiations was cast on proceedings that were fundamentally coercive in nature. Remembered for his eloquence as a public speaker, Quinney himself gave voice to this tension during a speech given the day before Independence Day in 1854. Reflecting on the negotiation process with the American government, Quinney said that "Nothing deserving the name purchase was ever made" (62). In the speech, Quinney concluded that the ruse of the government had been to have the appropriation of Indigenous land through legislation masquerade as the unfolding of justice, saying "Oh, what a mockery to confound justice with law" (63). For Turner, the wampum beads serve as a point of entry into a narrative of displacement, at the same time as they tell a story of resistance to the colonizing forces that precipitated the migration of so many Indigenous communities away from their ancestral homelands on the eastern shore of North America.

The final intervention of the text returns to the opening questions posed by Turner surrounding the nature of Indigenous artifacts and their function as objects of aesthetic and ceremonial value, as well as critical historical records. Turner suggests

that many objects created by Indigenous people reflect the social and economic relationships that they had with people and communities that they encountered. A cap adorned with elaborate beadwork introduces this intervention, offered by Turner as an example of an Indigenous-made object whose intended audience was largely European. The cap, known as a Glengarry cap because of the Scottish style it emulates, was created around 1875 in New York by an artist from the Tuscarora nation. The Tuscarora and other Haudenosaunee nations were known for their beadwork, which they perfected and innovated upon using glass beads during the second half of the twentieth century. Responding to the interest of non-native people in their beadwork, they produced a range of articles known as “whimsies”, which took objects considered commonplace in many non-native households, and embellished them with elaborate beadwork. Beaded tea cozies, purses and hats became objects of both aesthetic value and everyday utility, and were distinct from the tourist-oriented Indigenous memorabilia that replicated Indigenous ceremonial objects and dress. In this way, Turner argues that “whimsies subtly and richly represented the persistence and achievements of native people through their presence in the very homes of European Americans” (64).

The chapter closes with a photograph from the late 19th century, showing Tuscaroran whimsy-sellers near Niagara Falls, New York, selling their wares to two European American women. Turner reflects on the significance of the photograph, suggesting that there are complex dimensions of “remembered histories” embedded in Indigenous objects. In the case of the Tuscaroran whimsies, Turner argues that the objects “preserve perspectives on others’ lives”, thus investing the art objects with the

functions of both memory and history (64). Often the complex interplay of power, appropriation and interdependence gave way to Indigenous art objects whose interpretation reveals the density of the social contexts in which they were created. In contrast to the Tsimshian headdress that opens the chapter, the Glengarry cap speaks in a different voice of the cumulative effects of European contact, colonisation and American expansion. Having encountered settler colonialism over a century earlier than their West coast counterparts, the Indigenous peoples of the East coast produced objects that reflect an entanglement with European immigrants in early America. Crucially, Turner points out that the Glengarry style of cap, having once been associated with Scottish military dress and introduced to the Haudenosaunee through the deployment of British troops in North America, has today become a feature of Haudenosaunee ceremonial dress. Whether the appropriation of the cap was at one point satirical or not, the Glengarry cap, embellished with colorful glass beadwork, is today typically worn by women for social dancing. In this way, the Glengarry cap and the surrounding context for it provided by Turner is emblematic of the manner in which native art objects can become “material witnesses” to the histories of Indigenous communities, representing the negotiations, upheaval and resilience that characterized their experiences under colonialism (64). While Turner concedes that the connection between objects of art and histories of migration is not unique to the Indigenous communities of North America, he insists that native histories would be incomplete without their correlating objects.



[Fig. 12: Glengarry cap with raised beadwork, produced by a Tuscaroran artist c. 1875. National Museum of the American Indian, 2020.]

The treatment of Indigenous objects and histories in the *Many Voices* exhibit raises the important question of whether, and to what extent, the practices of the Smithsonian Institution as a whole have changed in response to the practices elaborated at the National Museum of the American Indian. If, as the anthology suggests, representing Indigenous history requires creating new modes of reading Indigenous objects as records of critical historical events, the display of Indigenous objects would require interpretation that could bring this aspect to light. While displays of wampum belts in the National Museum of the American Indian's *Nation to Nation* exhibit have been designed to showcase the contractual nature of these objects, the *Many Voices* exhibit fails to present the meaning of the objects as records of agreements, concessions and struggles. As Jennifer Shannon (2009) has noted, the signature element in the NMAI's curatorial approach has been the privileging of "Native voice" throughout its exhibits. Photographs of contributors to textual elements,

first-person narratives, and the inclusion of tribal affiliations are examples of practices aimed at emphasizing Native voice and agency in NMAI displays. Margaret Dubin (2001) has further noted that “new museology” requires a dramatic transformation in the display of Indigenous objects, affecting both the “discursive space as well as physical space” (86). The ultimate goal, according to Dubin, is to allow Indigenous objects to “become speaking subjects who voice their own ideas and continue to (or even seize control of) their own representations” (86). While the privileging of dialogic engagement with Indigenous objects has been positioned as a central pillar in the approach of the NMAI to its exhibits, the display of Indigenous objects in the Smithsonian writ large (even those objects on loan from the NMAI), lacks the space needed to create a meaningfully dialogic experience.

### **Globalizing American History**

The final chapter in the first section of the catalogue is called “Now/Then, We/Them? Toward a More Global U.S. History”, and is written by John Kuo Wei Tchen, a scholar of American and Asian-American cultural history. In addition to his work on archives and epistemologies, Tchen was also one of the founding curators of the Museum of Chinese in America, located in New York City (MOCA). Tchen begins by referencing the events of the Boston Tea Party, the event in 1773 in which a political group called the Sons of Liberty protested colonial taxes imposed by Britain by throwing crates of British East India Company Tea into the water at the Boston Harbour. Crucially, the Sons of Liberty dressed themselves as Indigenous people as they carried out their

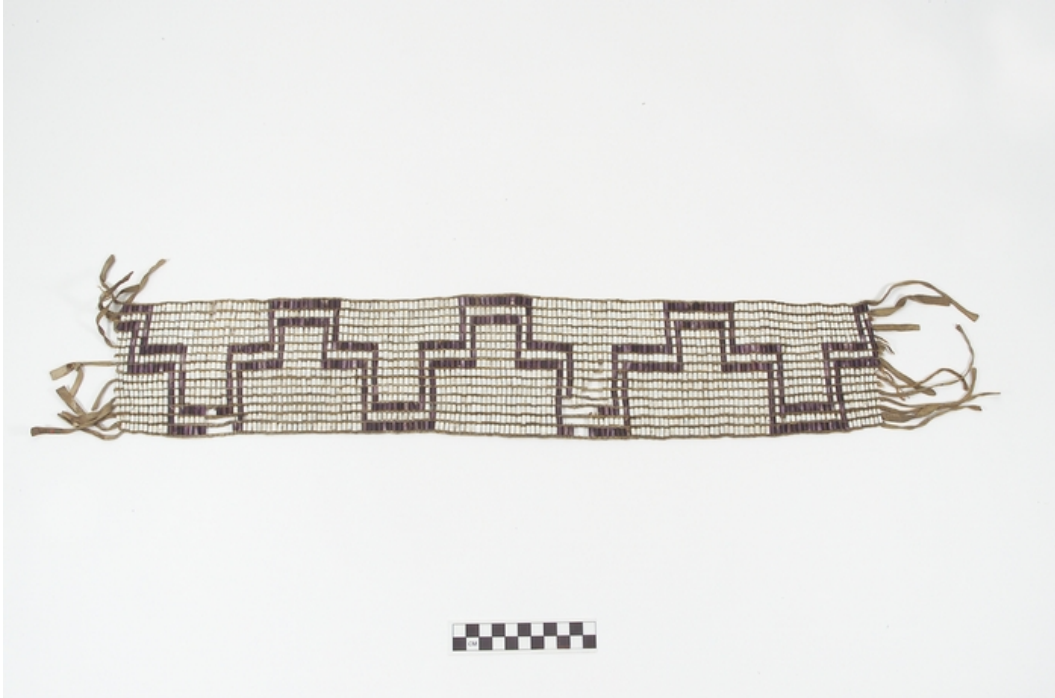
protest. The first object represented in the article, a porcelain teapot manufactured between 1766 and 1770, makes clear the sentiment of the protesters. The side of the teapot reads “America: Liberty Restored”, and while this particular teapot was created to commemorate a separate American triumph over Britain in the rejection of the Stamp Act<sup>6</sup>, the idea remains the same. Liberty and natural law were the cornerstones of American society. Of course, at the same time that early Americans organized to cast off the repressive elements of British colonial rule, a parallel process of colonial encroachment was underway at the hands of the Americans, and as Tchen points out, “With every possession, there was a dispossession” (69). In order to understand the root of this contradiction, Tchen looks to the approach to the questions of property and ownership rooted in eighteenth-century liberal ideology. The doctrine of “natural” rights as understood in Anglo-American law stipulated that the fact of improving or cultivating a parcel of land made one its rightful owner. An extension of the doctrine of Terra Nullius, which stipulated that non-Christians and non-whites could not be deemed to be proprietors of land, the concept of natural rights meant that a man’s labor alone could effectively lead to his private ownership of a plot of land: “He by his labor does, as it were, inclose it from the Common” (69). In this framework, Indigenous people were understood as merely living *on* the land without contributing to its cultivation (though, as Tchen points out, this was not at all the case), and hence were seen as having forfeited their rights as landowners.

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the imposition of a tax intended to offset the cost of providing British military protection to the colonies, the Stamp Act imposed the requirement that many printed materials in the British colonies be printed on paper produced and embossed in London. See Gordon S. Wood, 2001.

Returning to his account of the Boston Tea Party, Tchen suggests that the claim to American identity made by the Sons of Liberty through their act of protest was a negation that was twofold: on the one hand, they asserted through the protest that they were not British or European, on the other, through their satirical masquerading as Indigenous people, they also asserted that they were not native to this land. Tchen argues that the tension created asserting an American identity through negation marked the beginning of a crisis in American identity that continues to this day (70). By way of contending with what this crisis in identity entails for museological praxis, Tchen proposes a curatorial experiment, suggesting that we “pretend for the moment that the powerful don’t dominate the writing, the classification, collecting and archiving of the past to justify the present” (70). The purpose of this suspension of meaning and assumptions, suggests Tchen, would be to remove certain objects that have become entangled in the broader narratives of American history, and to position them alongside one another in order to “loosen up what is known and to momentarily intervene in what is to come” (70). He assembles three objects for this experiment in curation: a wampum belt, a bowl made of Chinese porcelain, and a Mexican dollar, or reale, minted in 1762. With this collection of objects before us, Tchen asks how an American story that is more “globally informed” might emerge (71). Finally, he wonders how this changed perspective on objects from America’s past might change our perception of what is possible in the present.





[Fig. 11: Wampum belt made of whelk and quahog shells said to have been a gift from the Lenape to William Penn c. 1680. National museum of the American Indian, 2020.]

Beginning with the wampum belt, Tchen approaches the origin story of the City of New York, with its founding tale of a Dutch “purchase” of the island of Manhattan in exchange for a collection of items described as “baubles” in historic accounts of the transaction (71). Among the items exchanged were several metal drill bits whose use dramatically increased the production of wampum beads. Following the introduction of the metal drill bits, wampum beads began to function as the first form of currency in use in North America. The wampum belt represented in Tchen’s text is said to have been a gift from the Lenape nation to William Penn, the Quaker settler and namesake for the state of Pennsylvania. Wampum belts, made of hundreds of small purple and white beads, were created to express a “range of political, social and interpersonal

relationships among peoples and nations” (72). While the belts were first used to establish agreements, alliances and understandings among native communities, they were later used as records between Indigenous people and Europeans. As Tchen explains, “the creation and exchange of a wampum belt established relationships between the makers, the givers, and the receivers”, in which receivers had the responsibility of “keeping true to the spirit of the gift received” (72). With each belt containing hundreds of tiny beads, the skill and attention to detail required in the creation of a wampum belt was intended to be representative of the gravity of the commitment that it recorded and symbolized.

Tchen turns to the question of the interpretation of the significance of wampum belts in American museological practice, in order to consider the ways in which they have been ascribed meaning in different exhibitional contexts. In a 2006 exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery, the Lenape-Penn wampum belt was given the title “William Penn’s Lenape Wampum Belt” and was further described in the following manner: “Lenape tribal leaders presented this belt to William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania. . . The meandering pattern may refer abstractly to terms of the agreement reached with Penn and his Quaker followers” (72). In addition to the description being offered in the “typical authoritative voice of a curator”, Tchen argues that the belt’s placement under the section of the exhibit called “American Origins” further submits its meaning to an American colonial interpretation (72). As art historian Ruth B. Phillips has pointed out, this approach to the interpretation of wampum belts subordinates their meaning to a “teleological account of American continental expansion and dominance, leaving no

space for an antiphonal expression of continuing native American claims to sovereign status” (quoted in Tchen). Indeed, contemporary Lenape claims to sovereignty contradict this retelling of the establishment of Pennsylvania, and depart from the exhibit’s suggestion that the belt’s “meandering pattern” refers only abstractly to the terms of an agreement. With this contradiction of meanings in mind, Tchen considers what the reparative role of curation might be, asking “Can a series of curatorial (mis)judgements of placement, conceptual framing, and writing remain oblivious to the larger reality of what truly happened?” (72). While the exhibition makes confident statements about the significance of the wampum belt, Tchen asserts that its ‘true’ meaning may very well be lost forever. In light of this, how can curatorial practices adequately capture the ambivalent interpretations of objects such as the Lenape-Penn wampum belt, particularly in instances in which an object’s interpretation is leveraged in contemporary struggles for (and against) Indigenous sovereignty?

In order to explore this question, Tchen suggests what might be thought of as a kind of curatorial ambivalence, an uncertainty that attempts to approximate the unknowability of the object’s original intention and purpose. The truth is, writes Tchen, that we “simply don’t know if this piece is a token of an agreement or not”, and while it is possible to arrive at plausible interpretations of the object, the “actual meaning and history of this “belt” is yet to be determined and may be lost forever” (72). An additional option not explicitly named by Tchen could be that there never was a singular meaning associated with the object at all - that like so many objects that are part of the socio-cultural landscape created by humans, it’s meaning was always unclear,

ambivalent or contested. What, then, is the role of the museum in collecting and preserving objects whose meanings may be largely unknown and unknowable? How can such objects be exhibited and described in the context of public display, a genre which relies so heavily on the descriptive authority of the curator? In answer to this conundrum, Tchen proposes that museum praxis should be receptive to changing understandings of objects, suggesting that the emergence and amplification of Indigenous voices in museum spaces will yield new interpretative possibilities and refresh debates over the meaning of many objects (73). This proposal raises the question of what the social use of object-based histories might be. By showing that object interpretation has always been subject to assumptive, culturally-biased analysis, the compulsion to provide a “true” story of an object’s meaning might give way to an approach that privileges emergent anti-phonal interpretations.

Turning to the final two objects represented in his text, Tchen begins to reveal the vastness of the global inter-connectedness that shaped early American life, but that has largely fallen outside of the manner in which American history is told. Beginning with a piece of *ciqi*, a piece of Chinese porcelain made in Jiangxi Province between the late sixth to seventh centuries, Tchen describes the early impetus of North American exploration as being primarily concerned with finding “what China wanted” (74). Animal pelts and ginseng root (used in Indigenous medicinal practice) were in high demand in China, and extracting these commodities from North America was a central step in gaining access to Chinese goods such as porcelain, tea and silk. With very little of their own that was in demand by the merchants of Canton, the imperial exploration and

exploitation of North American commodities by European powers was inextricably linked to bolstering trade opportunities with China. Citing French explorer Samuel de Champlain's account of his journeys in his 1604 text *Des Sauvages*, Tchen points out that the connectedness of wampum and porcelain as symbols of mercantile force was clear to early explorers, with Champlain debating whether to call North American cowry shells "wampum" or "*porcelaine*" (74). Across great distances and over extensive periods of time, wampum beads and porcelain were in fact entangled in a web of economic exchange that drove imperial expansion and conflict in North America.

The final object represented in Tchen's text is a Mexican reale, a silver coin minted in 1792 from silver mined in the Spanish colonies in America. By 1521, the Spanish had conquered the Aztecs and established the Mexican Mint, which over the next three centuries would produce one-ounce Mexican dollars that became the primary coin of global trade. Tchen points out that the geographic relationship of the various centers of global trade also shifted with the introduction of the reale in the global economy, when in 1565, the first Spanish trade ship bound for China leaving the Americas used a newfound route via the Pacific (75). In addition to its coveted status as a global form of currency, the reale was integral to the economy of North America, continuing to be legal tender in the United States until 1857. The reale represented in the article is part of the NMAH collection, and its Latin inscription reads "utraque unum" or "both are one" - an allusion to the consolidation of imperial Spain and the New World of the Americas (75). Attending to the question of labor as it was harnessed and extracted within this new economic configuration, Tchen draws a connection between

the forced labor of the Indigenous miners in Spanish America and those native peoples across the globe whose work was devoured by the imperial economic structure of the time. In this sense, Tchen argues that “the Indigenous silver miner in Potosi became interlinked with a Manila dockhand with a tea-leaf picker in the mountains of Fujian”, concluding that “Each locally produced item entered a global trade linked to other local producers that defied empires and the imagined boundaries of the nation state” (76). Tchen’s titular project - that of looking towards a more global account of US history - is thus articulated as a perspective on the past that situates the socio-economic world of the United States within a composite system of relationships based on commodities, resources, labor, trade and consumer demand.

Finally, Tchen revisits the teapot represented at the beginning of the text, in order to ask whether the object ought to be considered “American”. In the first instance, it might appear that it should, given its explicit reference to the “restoration” of American liberty. Yet when we consider the circumstances under which the teapot was produced, down to the individual whose hands brought the object into being, we see that the teapot tells quite a different story. The teapot, reveals Tchen, was actually manufactured by line workers at the Cockpit Hill Factory in Derby, England. The industrial revolution and its effects on the manufacturing industry in Britain dramatically transformed the scale and direction of the global movement of products, as English factories produced and exported goods for global consumption - even in former colonies. While there was undoubtedly a growing trend at the time of British-made objects being exported abroad, the specifics of this object - a British made teapot celebrating American independence

from Britain - raises particular questions about the relationship between industrialization, global enterprise and imperial politics. Tchen wonders: "Did the owner-designer cheekily sneak this order past the British West India Company?" (76). While Tchen concedes that the British Empire surely had domestic dissenters, he considers the political and social environment that would make the production of such a teapot possible, concluding that the nature of capitalist enterprise was "separate from the state's political interests" (76). This approach to global trade that was positioned as (at least partially) distinct from the state's political interests was mirrored by American entrepreneurs as well. The first American trade ship, aptly named the *Empress of China* set sail for Canton in 1784, loaded with furs, ginseng root and Mexican reales, as Americans positioned themselves vis-à-vis the global market.

What do we make of the relationships of labor, trade, exploitation and movement that impacted early American history in this way? What are the implications of such a telling of history on our representations of it, museological and otherwise? Tchen suggests that the "deeper set of relations" that lies at the root of the objects assembled in his article reveals a need to "recognize those who made things with their hands and creativity - those who became further linked in a globalizing system of exchanges" (76). For Tchen, the "people-to-people stories" are what are most valuable in affording us a nuanced and multi-phonal account of "American" history (77). He concludes by pointing to the connections between the individuals whose lives and labor were entangled by and through imperial exploration and expansion and global trade:

The people who dug the mineral-rich clay of southern China for the potters of Jingdezhen workshops and the women who climbed mountains to pick tea leaves were now linked in chains of interaction to the makers of

wampum fashioned from the shells of the primordial saltwater estuaries of Long Island Sound, and to the Indios extracting and smelting silver in Zacatecas, and to the factory hand making rebel teapots in Derby (77). The reimagining of the American mythos as one that is fundamentally global in nature disrupts the narrative of American progress and triumph that leaves little room for the lives and experiences of the people implicated in the convergence of events that culminated in the establishment of the United States as we know it. Tchen points out that we often hear that profit lay at the root of the global system of exploration and trade that led to European imperial expansion in the Americas, and yet we know that “far more than profit was embodied in the processes of wampum making”, and we certainly also know that “far more than profit is what kept these exchange relationships meaningful and active” (77). The objects assembled in Tchen’s text are intended to represent a fragment of the exchange relationships that shaped the history of the Americas, with each piece encompassing a very specific relationship of production and “returning us to a human hand of great ingenuity and skill” (77). More importantly, the objects direct our attention towards the host of narratives that often lay at the margins of official histories, leading us to a place that is “full of histories and missing decolonized stories yet to be uncovered and retold” (77). This form of historical inquiry, muses Tchen, is precisely what James Smithson might have intended in bequeathing his estate to a country he had never visited.

Offered as a corrective approach to the conventional mode of history-telling and exhibition, the object-based orientation of Tchen’s text is one in which the objects are established as points of historical departure, rather than as props that are used to embellish an existing narrative. The objects are invited to tell their own stories, with the



emerging narratives woven together through an approach to historiography that is decidedly extranational in scope. The text's titular question interrupts the certainty with which national histories are reconstructed and retold, making way for a global retelling of America's past that blurs the boundaries of national identity. In this configuration, objects drawn from across the Smithsonian's collections are leveraged as material time-capsules, with complex and largely untold stories and interpretations that change the orientation of the histories they tell. Finally, Tchen suggests that rather than being fixed, the meaning of the objects should be regarded as permanently inexhaustible, open to new forms of knowledge and unfolding interpretations, as changing relations of authority and audience give way to new modes of collection, preservation and exhibition in museum spaces.

## Chapter Five

### American Expansionism and the Crystallization of Whiteness

Narratives of American expansion were undergirded by the Doctrine of Discovery, but were also propelled by the concept of Manifest Destiny - a framework that supported an expansionist narrative and provided justification for the removal, resettlement and enslavement of those whose freedom stood in opposition to the nation's development. When journalist and politician John O'Sullivan first coined the term manifest destiny in 1845, he gave voice to an idea that would later come to symbolize a belief in the providential nature of American expansion across the continent, and eventually, beyond mainland United States. American expansion, according to the logic of manifest destiny, was quite literally a way of bringing about God's will. Initially used to describe the annexation of Texas and Oregon, the term would enjoy a resurrection in the later part of the 19th century, and would continue to be reshaped in order to describe the privileged standing of the United States into the 20th century (Stephanson 1995). The idea of manifest destiny no doubt continues to color American patriotic discourse in the form of an exceptionalist logic that extends to contemporary approaches to trade, immigration and foreign policy.

As a counterpart to manifest destiny, the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of terra nullius informed early understandings of the availability of explored land, and functioned to entrench the primacy of whiteness as the defining characteristic of a

rightful inhabitant. Legal scholar Robert Miller (2019) describes the Doctrine of Discovery as having provided the framework surrounding European settlement from the 15th to the 20th centuries, stating that “The Doctrine provided that Europeans automatically acquired property rights in native lands, and gained governmental, political and commercial rights over the Indigenous inhabitants without their knowledge or consent” (330). Crucially, the Doctrine applied only to white Christians of European descent, effectively removing the right to possess land from Indigenous and other non-white inhabitants. The Doctrine of Discovery therefore functioned as the foundational framework on which the idea of whiteness as a central characteristic of the United States would later be built, entrenched in the institution of chattel slavery, property laws, immigration policy, as well as access to housing, education and suffrage.

Against this backdrop, the period following the Declaration of Independence was characterized by the most permissive immigration policies towards white Europeans in the history of the United States, policies that facilitated and promoted the arrival of white European immigrants, and in many cases sought them out as ideal settlers of the new nation. The transatlantic slave trade continued to shape the demographic makeup of the nation, while further cementing the logic of racism into the nation’s social, political and economic fabric. The ongoing efforts by the American government to appropriate Indigenous land and to displace Indigenous people from lands they wished to appropriate, occurred alongside this intensive wave of European immigration.

The “Peopling and Expanding the Nation” section of the *Many Voices* exhibit explores the period of intensive immigration between 1776 and 1900 that shaped the

demographic composition of the United States during the period following the Revolutionary War. As Sherene Razack describes in her introduction to *Race, Space and the Law* (2002), the national mythologies of settler societies insist that white people “came first”, and that Indigenous peoples are “presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated” (1). As such, European settlers are transformed into the native inhabitants of the land, and are therefore regarded as the group of individuals who are “most entitled to the fruits of citizenship” (2). In order to understand the effects produced by accounts of the past that reify the settler-centered worldview, we might ask how histories feed narratives of the future, and specifically, how they bring certain narratives of the potential into being. In their 2018 study on changing racial dynamics in America, Craig, Rucker and Richeson found that concerns over what is often described as a changing demographic landscape in the United States circulate in the form of anxieties over white Americans becoming a “minority” group. As their research shows, the language of white Americans becoming a minority group has had profound impacts on the political and social reality of the United States. Their research demonstrates that concern over the United States becoming a so-called “majority-minority” nation has led to a polarization among voters, some of whom more strongly adopt vigorously conservative positions on issues such as immigration and border control. The anxieties of the present, founded on narratives of the past, are therefore directly linked to bringing about particular futures, in this case, one in which there is strong support among certain white voters for restrictive immigration policy. As the language of “peopling” in this section of the *Many Voices* exhibit suggests, the idea of terra nullius - of a vast and

vacant landscape inhabited and owned by no one - is predicated on the denial of the presence of those who formed the first majority groups on the continent. The reimagining of white Americans as the original majority group is thus inextricable from historical narratives that centralize white European immigration.

### **White Settlement and Indigenous Removal**

As a story that the National Museum of American History must represent and retell, the tale of American expansion expresses the centrality of whiteness and white supremacist logic, an element of American society that is imagined as being in the past or having been “gotten over” as a question settled by the American Civil War. As Ibram Kendi has shown in his book *Stamped from the Beginning* (2016), racist ideas have remained constant in the United States, naturalized to the degree that they form “common sense”, rather than a set of identifiable opinions, practices and policies (4). As a set of issues that remains at the forefront of discussions and debates about American identity, racism and white supremacist ideologies present a challenge to the historiographic desire to relegate white supremacy to the American past, or to look over it altogether as a mark on the American story that was successfully scrubbed away. Representing the complex relationship between American identity and whiteness, then, requires omission, as much as it requires representation.

The “Peopling” section begins with an introductory text that describes the period of 1779-1900 as one of change and diversification in the makeup of the American people. Placing an emphasis on diversity, the opening text frames this time period in

terms of a continued trend of different peoples interacting and negotiating with one another, explaining that the “inhabitants of the new nation were diverse and they would become more so with westward expansion, the importation of enslaved Africans, incorporation and conquest of land and peoples, and increasing immigration and migration” (Peopling). The content of the section is structured around five thematic anchors, beginning with a display case titled “Out of Many” which introduces the theme of immigration and American nation-building efforts, followed by “Pushed and Pulled”, a section about European immigration, a section called “Western Migration to the Mississippi Valley”, a section about American western expansion called “Incorporating Western Lands” and, finally, a section about extra-continental American expansion titled “Beyond the Continent”. That the opening text for this portion of the exhibit begins with the concept of diversity points to the foundational tension of this portion of the display. On the one hand, the display aims to recognize the inherent diversity of the inhabitants of the United States, while on the other, it traces the consolidation of American white supremacy and the emergence of the United States as a “white” nation. As with the first section of the exhibit, the themes of colonialism and slavery receive more in-depth treatment in the exhibit anthology than in the physical exhibit itself. While the repeated displacement of Indigenous communities underlies the stories of expansion and territorial “incorporation” outlined in the physical exhibit, these facets of American expansion receive little direct attention, and instead are implied in the stories used to describe expansion and annexation.

The exhibit offers the language of “peopling” as a way of describing the patterns of immigration to the United States during the 124-year span covered by this portion of the display. At the same time as it makes liberal use of the term “people”, the exhibit’s content also makes clear that only certain types of people were counted in this “peopling” process, and that the removal and disenfranchisement of other people was a necessary precursor to attempts to populate the new nation with desirable citizens of European ancestry. Efforts to attract and settle immigrants of European descent were coupled with extremely permissive naturalization laws that favored white immigration, effectively solidifying the legislative foundations onto which whiteness was inscribed into the national identity of the United States. This was a period of intensive meaning-making for the United States, as the government sought to recast the story of the new nation as the product of European-descended pith, fortitude, and moral enlightenment. The whitewashing of the nation’s inhabitants was part and parcel of this new narrative, a process reflected in the data that was collected, the histories that were written, and the imagery that was produced during this period. National imagery, symbolism and knowledge production thus figure prominently in the first part of the section, essential as these elements were in forming the canvas on which the landscape of the new nation could be envisaged.

## Inscribing Whiteness into the National Narrative

How might we read the “Peopling” section of the exhibit for a genealogy of American whiteness? What markers might we look for in the objects and their attendant texts that can trace the development of whiteness as an American characteristic, even when whiteness itself is hardly named? As a contemporary exhibit about the past, the *Many Voices* exhibit provides insight into the current anxieties that surround white identity, while the competition of meanings ascribed to whiteness remains as central to American identity and national narrative as ever, shaping the future of the nation and its inhabitants in palpable ways.

The national imagery displayed in this section revolves around several key themes that correspond to the demographic and political shifts that took place during the period. In the first instance, the Revolutionary War prompted a host of efforts to map the American nation as a cohesive entity, rather than as a mere collection of colonies. Alongside the drive to recast the fractured territory as a continuous whole, the work of crystallizing whiteness as a national characteristic required a convergence of policy, discourse and imagery. The examples of nation-building offered in this section of the exhibit include statues of Uncle Sam and Columbia, two “census pitchers” manufactured in the wake of the 1790 census, and the design of the Great Seal of the United States. Each example offers insight into the entwined relationship between legislation, nation-building and the production of national imagery.





[Fig. 12-13: Figure of Uncle Sam, c. early 1900s, *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2020; Statue of Columbia, c. 1860 in the “Peopling the Nation” section of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2020.]

Personifying the nation formed an important component of the project of nation building in the early 19th century. As Donald Dewey argues in *The Art of Ill Will*, the “plethora of national symbols, spanning the human, animal, and mythological, was inevitable for a fledgling republic seeking an identity” (13). Next to the introductory text for the “Out of Many” section stands a large statue of Uncle Sam, made by the National Papier Mache Works in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the early 1900s. Early renditions of Uncle Sam began appearing long before his association with World War I recruitment

was solidified, with the first uses of his likeness emerging in the 1830s (Dewey 16). In the first instance, the statue seems out of place as the display's introductory object, Uncle Sam's association with World War I and contemporary American patriotism clashing with the time period referenced by this section of the exhibit. In another sense, the technology of national symbolism that Uncle Sam represents aptly corresponds to the ideological maturation of the idea of the United States and the personification of its government that took root during this period. The expansion of American borders corresponded, during the post-Independence era, to an expansion of the idea of the American Government and its role in carrying out the aggrandizement of the nation. First introduced during the War of 1812, Uncle Sam became the ubiquitous symbol of the Union during the Civil War, later becoming synonymous with the American Government writ large. Although the title of this section of the exhibit purports to deal primarily with questions of immigration and demographic changes, the issue of national symbolism undergirds the entire narrative, as competing perspectives on American identity sought to assert themselves in these early post-independence years. Historian Christopher Capozzola (2008), has examined the spread of the image of Uncle Sam during World War I, arguing that the use of Uncle Sam's image "helped Americans understand their relationship to the wartime government" (5). Although the well-known depiction of Uncle Sam on the 1917 U.S. Army recruitment poster emerged after the period examined in this section of the exhibit, the idea of the American government that took shape during this time makes Uncle Sam a fitting host for this part of the display.

In addition to Uncle Sam, a mid-nineteenth century wooden statue of Columbia is displayed, showing her wearing a liberty cap and holding a patriotic shield with thirteen stars representing the thirteen founding colonies. The accompanying description tells us that Columbia was one of the earliest figures to be used to symbolize the United States, emerging after Chief Justice Samuel Sewall of the Massachusetts Bay Colony offered a poetic argument in favor of naming the colonies “Columbina”. While we’re told that the figure of Columbia was relatively short-lived in its popularity (replaced by the familiar image of Lady Liberty beginning in the middle of the 19th century), the Uncle Sam figure is described in terms of its pervasiveness over several stages in American history. Importantly, Dewey argues that different imagery was required for different symbolic purposes, with Lady Liberty and her earlier counterpart Columbia symbolizing American values, and Uncle Sam representing the authority of government (13). Crucially, the whiteness of the figures chosen to personify the new nation further deepened the consolidation of whiteness as a key characteristic of the United States. The use of white people as symbols for the new nation coincided with the project of transforming the image of the new nation from a patchwork of colonies and territories in which Indigenous people and enslaved and free non-white people likely made up the majority of the population, to a cohesive nation with a singular European-descended white identity.

In the exhibit anthology, historian Alan Kraut explores the image of Lady Liberty in his article “Lady in the Harbor: The Statue of Liberty as American Icon”, written by historian. The figure of Lady Liberty appears three times in the physical exhibit, twice in

larger formats and once in the form of a smaller replica, with the smaller version also pictured in the anthology. Kraut begins by setting up the contradiction between the statue's intended meaning at the time of its creation around 1884 and its contemporary significance. Conceived of by sculptor Auguste Bartholdi with support from scholar Édouard-Réné Lefebvre de Laboulaye, the statue was initially envisaged as a gift to celebrate the end of slavery in the United States, though the meaning of the statue changed during the course of the nineteenth century to become representative of America's welcoming stance towards immigration. In Kraut's words, the statue's meaning has become a "national mythology" in which it is believed that the statue was "by design a welcoming beacon of liberty and altruistic sanctuary for the oppressed and impoverished of other lands" (123). What was the process that made it possible for a statue that was a gift from the people of France commemorating the abolition of American slavery to become a symbol of the American dream? As Kraut points out, this shift involved replacing the intended centrality of the "involuntary migration" of enslaved Africans with the "voluntary migration" of immigrants in search of prosperity in the United States (124). By tracing the history of the statue's design and construction, Kraut follows the challenges and contradictions that shaped the statue's early existence. Taken by the idea of French-American camaraderie, as well as the parallelism of America's abolition of slavery after the Civil War, just as France had abolished slavery in 1794, Bartholdi and Laboulaye shared a passionate vision for a statue that could represent a friendship between the two nations and that would be a gift not from one government to another, but from "one people to another" (125). The centrality of the

idea of emancipation is evident in the design of the statue itself, with Lady Liberty crushing the chains of bondage with her left foot, referencing the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that brought an end to slavery.

At the time of the gifting of Lady Liberty from France to the United States, there was little consensus among African American communities on the symbolism of the statue. Kraut looks to newspaper articles for insight into how news of the statue was received. Citing an 1886 editorial that appeared in the *Cleveland Gazette*, an African American publication, Kraut points to the early criticisms that the statue masked the enduring realities of racism in the United States by presupposing that the Thirteenth Amendment had effectively alleviated racial inequities:

It is proper that the torch of the Bartholdi statue should *not* be lighted until the country becomes a free one in reality. 'Liberty Enlightening the World', indeed! The expression makes us sick. This government is a howling farce. It can not or rather *does not* protect its citizens within its *own* borders... (127).

Kraut continues his analysis by recounting the horrific lynching of three Black men in 1906 in Springfield, Missouri. The mob hung the men and burned their bodies, and later removed a model of the Statue of Liberty from the town center, placing it atop the tower from which the men had been hanged. As Kimberly Harper argues in *White Man's Haven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894-1909*, the rise of post-Civil War mob violence directed at African Americans correlated with their exodus to areas less tolerant of vigilantism. The deliberate use of the image of Lady Liberty as a way of justifying domestic terrorism of this kind prompted further criticism of the hypocrisy behind the statue's symbolism by African American journalists. Kraut includes a 1917 quote from the *Chicago Defender* in which an image of the Statue of

Liberty was shown alongside the statements 'Liberty, Protection, Opportunity, Happiness, For all White Men' and 'Humiliation, Segregation, Lynching, for all Black Men' (127). While the statue had initially been conceived of as a commemoration of the end of human bondage, Kraut argues that it was widely viewed by American Blacks as "a specter of racial hypocrisy" (127). How then, was a symbol associated with racial hypocrisy reimagined into an emblem of hospitality and solace?

Tethering the image of Lady Liberty to the story of voluntary immigration to the United States is perhaps best symbolized through the 1883 poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus". The poem contains the now infamous stanza that would eventually be engraved on a bronze tablet mounted to a wall inside the statue's pedestal:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The "tale of two migrations" that Kraut argues lies as the root of the statue's complicated symbolism, remains largely overshadowed by the superimposition of the meaning given to the statue by Lazarus' poem. Contemporary debates over immigration policy have reinvigorated debates over the statue's meaning. As Dorothee Schneider argues in her article "I Know All about Emma Lazarus" (1998), the implied values of the Statue of Liberty collide with the impetus to implement ever-more restrictive immigration policies, even as globalization facilitates the cross-border movement of goods and services. The

“liberty” symbolized by the statue has therefore remained as contingent as it was when the construction of the statue first began on Liberty Island in 1875.

The 1790 census provided the basis for a range of broader data visualization efforts aimed at providing US citizens with a sense of American identity, as well as strong messaging on the question of who ought to “count” as a member of the nation, both literally and figuratively. The 1790 census, together with the 1790 Naturalization Act, functioned to reify American identity as quintessentially white. In the exhibit anthology, NMAH curator Bonnie Campbell Lilienfeld shows in her text titled “Creating and Expanding the Nation, 1776-1900”, how the 1790 Naturalization Act formalized a highly permissive immigration policy towards “free white” people, thereby facilitating the obtention of American citizenship for white immigrants, as well as entrenching the concept of the United States as a white nation. The Act lays out the naturalization process for white people in no uncertain terms:

...any alien, being a free white person, who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for a term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof. . .in any one of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least, and making proof to the satisfaction of the court, that he is a person of good character.

As Lilienfeld points out, the Naturalization Act denied the full rights and privileges of citizenship to many whose labor would sustain the American economy, namely enslaved and free Africans, and Chinese (83). Similarly, the 1790 census provided for only a partial representation of the numbers of enslaved inhabitants of African descent, and excluded nearly all Indigenous people. The accompanying text in the display further

indicates that over half of those counted were of British origin, with a much smaller segment of those counted being from other European backgrounds.

In order to be impactful on a larger scale, news of the census and imagery related to the centrality of whiteness in the new nation had to be disseminated across a large geographic area, and in a manner that would be accessible to a broad segment of the population. Propagandistic water pitchers became a medium of choice, given their relatively commonplace nature and widespread use. Two pitchers on display serve as examples of how these household objects were used to convey messages about the scope and nature of the United States. Each pitcher is an example of the combined forces of industrialization and nationalism, in which the manufacturing of nationalist paraphernalia allowed for the larger scale dissemination of messages about American identity. The first pitcher displays figures drawn from the 1790 census. At the top of the pitcher, a banner that reads “Prosperity to the United States of America” is held up by two white angels. Beneath the banner, data from the 1790 census is presented, with demographic figures represented by state, with a total of 18<sup>7</sup> jurisdictions named on the pitcher. Surrounding the data are images of fruit, buildings, a boat, and barrels and chests, as well as generic scenes of forests and wilderness.

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<sup>7</sup> An error in the figures for South Carolina represents the total population of that state as 24, 973 when it should have read 249, 073 (M. Anderson 4).





[Fig. 14: Pitcher featuring data from the 1790 census, made in Liverpool c. 1790. *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2020.]

On the second pitcher, a robed white woman points to a series of portraits of various men deemed to be of political significance to the European and American world. To her right, two small, dark-skinned people dressed in what was likely intended to symbolize Indigenous clothing, observe her intently, absorbing her lessons in history with infantile interest. She holds an American flag in her right hand, and above the scene, the words “Emblem of America” are printed on a ribbon. Importantly, the descriptive text notes that for centuries prior, the figure of an Indigenous woman was most commonly used to symbolize America, suggesting that the introduction of the image of a white woman marks an important shift towards figurative associations between whiteness and America. Both produced during the same ten-year period between 1890 and 1900, the two pitchers exemplify the process of transforming the image of the Americas into one in which whiteness becomes the central characteristic of its citizens. Through imagery and statistical manipulation, the pitchers offer insight into

the process of creating an idea of American identity, both of which were facilitated by the enhanced manufacturing possibilities of that period.

As Margo Anderson (2008) writes, visual artists have long been employed by census takers in order to develop visual representations of census data for the purpose of broad dissemination. Anderson argues that census-taking was a “uniquely public enterprise”, one that, in a manner similar to elections, was “part of the machinery of the state” that served as “symbol, icon or metaphor” for those who found themselves outside of the “data community” that collected the information (2). Crucially, Anderson notes that American census data has long been used to shape immigration policy, and to sway public opinion on immigration debates. The correlation between the 1790 Naturalization Act that restricted naturalization to white European immigrants and the 1790 census that provided a distorted representation of the United States as a white nation underscores the interconnectedness of demographic data and racist conceptions of American identity. Anderson concludes that data visualization has always been a key component of American census-taking, allowing data-driven messages to be disseminated to the “nondata world” of the American public (3). In a prime example of the intermingling of capitalist logic and nationalist ideology, these particular pitchers, and many others like them, were produced in England in the Herculaneum Pottery, located in Toxteth, Liverpool. Thus, only a few short years after the American Revolutionary War, English pottery became a vessel for the dissemination of ideas about American national identity.

Alongside the pitchers, the exhibit examines the development of the Great Seal of the United States, an enduring symbol that the exhibit describes as having “helped establish the nation’s sovereignty” (Peopling). A sketch of the original design developed by artist Pierre Du Simitière is shown alongside a coin bearing the design that was eventually retained by the committee charged with developing a national seal in 1782. Again, the accompanying text foregrounds the tension between difference and unity among the inhabitants of the young republic, pointing out that the first iteration of the seal developed by Du Simitière was a mixture of national symbols drawn from several European countries. Originally designed to combine an Irish harp, Dutch lion, Scottish thistle, French fleur-de-lys, German eagle and English rose, the final design contained only an American eagle. The accompanying text offers very little by way of an analysis of the two images of the seal, but the contradictory messages contained in each are poignant: at a moment when social difference was a central characteristic of American society, anxieties around these differences prevailed in the choice of national symbols. The result of these warring perspectives on American identity was that the image of the American eagle, together with the motto E Pluribus Unum, formed the official seal of the United States. The concept of national unity, however artificial at that early stage of national formation, prevailed as a crucial strategy for establishing the new nation.

### **Displacement, Migration and National Singularity**

In its reference to the American Civil War, the introductory text of this section of the exhibit describes the war as an event that “tested the strength of the Union”, but that

ultimately resulted in “a renewed commitment to the ideal of one nation” (Peopling). The concept of national singularity and unity clearly prevails in the framing of the introductory text, despite the mentions of continued colonisation of Indigenous lands and peoples, ongoing reliance on the labor of enslaved Africans, and the Civil War that tore the country apart on precisely these issues. Although the text ends with the argument that there was a “renewed” commitment to national unity, the statement stands in contrast to the divisiveness and brutality of the events of that period, and the ruptured nature of national identity expressed in the exhibit. Displacement and migration form the underlying themes in the “Peopling” section, characterizing the hierarchized movement of people across the continent as the contours of the new nation were drawn, contested and enforced. Three axes of migration are explored in depth: European immigration to the Midwest, migration along the Mississippi Valley, and the expansion into, and appropriation of, Indigenous lands with westward expansion. Finally, the exhibit concludes by exploring American extra-continental expansion into Hawai’i and Puerto Rico.

### **European Immigration to the Midwest**

Before delving into the specific circumstances surrounding German immigration to the Midwest and the correlating displacement of Indigenous communities in that area, the exhibit opens with a nod toward the discord that arose from this wave of immigration, stating that “Some Americans tolerated the growing diversity. Others reacted with hostility” (Peopling). Showcasing a large octagonal wooden table at its

center, the first display case centers the story of Peter Glass, a German immigrant to Wisconsin. Made in Wisconsin in 1868, the table's combination of German-style woodworking and American patriotic imagery suggests an emergent hybridity that is present as a theme throughout this section of the display. The exhibit includes an informational panel about the family of Peter Glass, who arrived in the United States from Bavaria in 1844, before eventually settling on a farm in Wisconsin. As a skilled woodworker, Glass became known for producing German-style wooden inlaid furniture that eventually began to incorporate American patriotic imagery. The story of the Glass family serves to describe the German community known as the 'German Triangle' that developed in the Midwest between Ohio, Wisconsin and Missouri. The exhibit text concludes that because of the rural context and the high concentration of German immigrants in the area, the "anti-immigration sentiment so prevalent in some U.S. cities gained less ground" in that area (Peopling). The table created by Peter Glass, inlaid with patriotic themes, is shown along with one of his woodworking tools and several medals that were awarded to him for his work.



[Fig. 15: Wooden table made by Peter Glass, featuring American patriotic imagery, 1868, *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2020.]

The Glass family story serves as a point of departure into an exploration of the Homestead Act of 1862, a piece of legislation that provided 160 acres of land to Americans and European immigrants who agreed to farm the land for a period of at least five years. The focus on the story of Peter Glass offers a tale of assimilation, while at the same time demonstrating the particularities of the German experience and the elements of that culture that were preserved through their adaptation as vehicles for American patriotism. Less evident than the narrative of assimilation provided in the rendering of the Glass family's story is the role of the Homestead Act in concretising the acquisition of land as the cornerstone of the American frontier experience. In her book, *Black Faces, White Spaces* (2014), Carolyn Finney examines the Homestead Act in relation to the concurrent displacement of Native Americans. Passed in 1830, the Indian Removal Act provided for the confiscation of Indigenous lands and the relocation of native communities through the establishment of a reservation system (22). As Finney argues, one piece of legislation cannot be examined without considering the role of the other. The lands made available to European immigrants through the Homestead Act were thus rendered vacant over the preceding decades of forced removal of Native Americans under the Indian Removal Act. Although the Homestead Act was drawn up with provisions that would allow free African Americans to apply for parcels of land, the web of bureaucratic discrimination they faced precluded this possibility for most. The Homestead Act was signed on the heels of the Indian Removal Act. Although the exhibit

text indicates that the parcels of land offered to immigrants were “often taken from Native peoples”, the exhibit text stops short of elucidating the connection between the Indian Removal Act and the Homestead Act, both of which, as argued by Finney, existed within a larger network of land-oriented legislation that enshrined the privileges of white immigrants in the United States, to the detriment of Indigenous and African American people.

Signed into law in 1830, the Indian Removal act made provisions for the forcible relocation of native peoples to lands west of the Mississippi River, thereby making additional land available to European American settlers. The exhibit text notes that some native peoples resisted relocation, referencing the process of linguistic, cultural and religious negotiation and adaptation that took place among communities that remained. Two daguerreotypes of Indian delegates brought to Washington, D.C. are shown, with a description that indicates that delegates were often brought to the U.S. capital in order to “to exhibit the power of the nation and to ratify treaties” (Peopling). Inequalities in the trading relationships between Indigenous communities and American merchants are also described, underscored by an image of a sample book used by American cloth merchants selling their wares to native communities. The lack of competition in available merchandise produced the conditions for exploitation, and the text indicates that “Because purchasers had few options, sellers often overcharged” (Peopling).

Two paintings of battle scenes follow, one painted by George Catlin, an American painter who specialized in paintings of Native Americans, and another by an unnamed

Indigenous painter (or group of painters), imprisoned for resisting relocation and for taking up arms against the American government. The accompanying description states that while imprisoned, “some Plains Indians made drawings on pages of old account books representing their past lives as warriors and hunters” (Peopling). The final section of the exhibit looks closely at the mission established at Grand Traverse Bay, Michigan. Offered as an example of the complex interplay of culture, language and religion, the exhibit shows a photograph of the mission house established by missionary Peter Dougherty, along with a description of the agreement he achieved with the Anishinaabe of Grand Traverse Bay to establish a school to teach English and to Christianize the community. The text informs us of why Dougherty’s mission was different, worthy of inclusion in the exhibit: it was “with Indian consent” that Dougherty established his mission, continuing to state that the Anishinabe “partially accommodated European American ways while maintaining aspects of their culture and way of life” (Peopling). The final photograph in the section shows an unnamed chief on horseback, wearing a mixture of both Indigenous and Western clothing. In the background, another man on horseback holds an American flag as he rides. The photograph, along with a short text about Agosa, an Anishinaabe chief, relates the story of how Peter Dougherty baptized Agosa in 1843, after he had purchased land and relocated his people under the threat of removal. Again, the impression left by the photograph is one that hints at cultural mixity, depicting the Western frontier as a space of negotiation rather than of strict appropriation.



Here, the exhibit text moves carefully between description and analysis, withholding the language of value judgment while cautiously naming inequality in specific, contained instances, such as trade. The overall effect is one of both rhetorical confusion and rhetorical possibility, where the unnamed dynamics function as place-holders for the injustice of colonial expansion, while at the same time refusing to fully give voice to them. Certainly, this approach functions to interrupt narratives of victimization, which can overshadow narratives of resilience and resistance. As Abra Wenzel (2017) has argued, it is imperative to surface alternative accounts of Indigenous experiences under colonialism, in order to “move beyond the narrow realm of victimization and introduce narratives of agency” (122). Wenzel underscores the importance of this approach because it “allows Indigenous peoples to explore new avenues of self-determination thus far not expressed to the public”, thereby broadening the stories available for educating both native and non-native audiences (123). At the same time, such an approach requires careful attention to balance, as it may be difficult to explore Indigenous resilience in an ethical manner without first fully contending with the degree of harm inflicted by colonialism. Even within the section of the exhibit dedicated to the relocation of native communities, there is no mention of the Trail of Tears - the forced relocation by foot of tens of thousands of Indigenous people as a result of the enforcement of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, during which thousands died of exposure and illness under extremely arduous conditions. The effect of this omission, together with the overall impression of cultural mixity and negotiation left by the online exhibit, functions to mask the gravity of the Indigenous removal and

assimilation policies of the American government, as well as to turn attention away from the enduring effects of these practices on contemporary American society.

The efforts to attract European immigrants to the Midwestern United States included a range of publications in several languages. The exhibit features several objects that were designed by the American government and railroad companies to court European immigrants and encourage them to settle on land in the western United States. An advertisement from around 1880, printed in both English and German, sought to entice immigrants to send away for a brochure about life in Wisconsin. An 1855 publication called *Handbook for Immigrants* is also shown, describing life in Iowa to potential migrants to the state. Finally, a traditional Swedish apron and the boxing banner of Irish boxer John L. Sullivan are shown, together with some brief text describing the famines that ushered emigration from each of those countries during the 19th century. The efforts to attract immigrants from northern European countries represent the culmination of what the Indian Removal Act began: the resettlement of appropriated lands by white settlers, and the disenfranchisement of the Indigenous population through the establishment of the reservation system.



[Figure 16: Advertisement in English and German produced by the Wisconsin Central Railroad Land Department, c. 1880, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2020.]

**Black Migration to the Mississippi Valley**

The next section of the display considers the importance of the Mississippi Valley in shaping American demographics, and follows the stories of three communities who migrated to the area. The display also attends to the westward expansion of the slave trade, facilitated by the transportation of goods and people along the Mississippi River.

Although the importation of enslaved people into the United States was banned in 1808, the strength of the cotton industry in the southern states supported the continued expansion of a thriving internal slave trade. A model of a nineteenth century riverboat is shown, with explanatory text suggesting that river-based transportation facilitated networks of information among free and enslaved Black people, in addition to transporting the goods that formed the basis of the economy in the American south. Following the stories of Free Frank McWorter, as well as the Mormon and Icarian communities who established themselves in the area, the display brings together objects and photographs from the three communities. At the center of the display hangs a large reproduction of a painting of the town of New Philadelphia around 1900. The painting's size, together with the brightness of its colors as they contrast with the black and white photographs and muted tones of the surrounding artifacts, make it the veritable visual centerpiece of the display case. In this sense, the prominence of the story of Frank McWorter and his family is emphasized in the physical display in a manner that is distinct from its treatment in the anthology. Although the objects and texts pertaining to the internal slave trade appear in the left-hand portion of the display case, immediately following the introductory text, the smaller scale of the textual elements of those artifacts obscure their detail, and emphasize the larger, bolder pieces in the display. As a result, the importance of the internal slave trade that continued to develop during this period can be easily overlooked.

The exhibit explores the transatlantic slave trade, and how it shaped the political and economic landscape in the Mississippi Valley region. The exhibit text identifies the

purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 as an event that marked the starting point for the westward expansion of slave states, thus altering the balance of power between northern and southern states in a conflict that would eventuate in the American Civil War. An aerial photograph of the Mississippi River is shown, accompanied by a second short paragraph that describes the role of the river in acting as a conduit of people, information and goods between disparate segments of American society. Beginning with the slave trade, this section shows a stereoview photograph of enslaved workers in a cotton field in the southern United States, dating from the 1860s. Above a model of a Mississippi riverboat, statistics are shown, indicating that at least 388,000 enslaved people were brought to the United States before the importation of enslaved people was banned in 1808. Beneath the figure of the riverboat, a ledger from the sale of a group of enslaved people is shown, with weights, ages and complexions indicated alongside each person's entry. The ledger serves as evidence of the thriving internal slave economy that persisted after the 1808 ban. Two photographs of a Virginia slave market are shown, alongside a description of New Orleans as a city that was characterized by social and cultural mixity. Finally, the exhibit considers the westward expansion of slavery itself, precipitated by the entry of Texas into the Union as a slave state in 1845. Here, the exhibit offers a narrative about Hiram Wilson, a man who was brought as a slave to work in a Texas pottery along with other enslaved workers in 1856. After Emancipation, Wilson was involved in establishing a separate successful pottery business as well as founding the free black town of Capote, Texas. A portrait of Hiram Wilson is shown alongside a jar made by the black potters at Wilson Pottery.

The following section tells the story of Free Frank McWorter, a man born enslaved in Kentucky who, over the course of his lifetime, was able to purchase his own freedom as well as the freedom of his thirteen family members. Offering a different story of migration, the text tells of McWorter's relocation to the Illinois frontier near the Mississippi River. There, he established the community of New Philadelphia where his family remained as farmers and artisans for generations. The exhibit, which contains several photographs of various members of the extended McWorter family, culminates with an image of a receipt for the purchase of Charlotte Cowan, McWorter's granddaughter in 1857. The accompanying text tells us that after Frank's death, it was his oldest son Solomon who sold parcels of the family land in order to purchase Charlotte's freedom. Here again, we are left with very little by way of analysis about what the displayed materials might mean for American society, both past and present. Despite this, we learn that even when it meant drawing from his deceased father's estate, Solomon McWorter continued the work of purchasing freedom for his enslaved extended family members.

When considering the weight of the financial burden of *purchasing* freedom - that state of being granted so unthinkingly to so many others in the United States at that time - the economic strain placed on enslaved people in the United States lines up with the financial precarity that presses disproportionately on African Americans today. In his 2004 book *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Thomas Shapiro shows how economic precarity establishes itself over several generations, leading to the economic inequities that so often fall along color lines in the United States. He argues that instead

of understanding economic stability as being purely a question of assets, we should understand that “family assets are more than mere money; they also provide a pathway for handing down racial legacies from generation to generation” (26). Without a correlating story of a white family’s migration to Illinois, or some other frontier location along the Mississippi, it is not easy to discern what the implications of this history might be for understanding racial wealth disparities in contemporary American society. As Shapiro points out, “what is really being handed down from generation to generation is the profound legacy of reproducing racial inequality”, but crucially, it is the “language of family heritage hides it from our political consciousness” (32). It is likely that the story of Frank McWorter was intended to serve as a counterpoint to the overwhelmingly impersonal accounts of the slave trade in the United States included in the exhibit - stories that often overlook the myriad ways in which resistance took shape. Still, the opportunity cost associated with McWorter’s efforts to purchase the freedom of his family members - an effort that continued after his death through his son’s use of his estate - remains hidden behind the story of his resolve and entrepreneurial energies.

An article titled “Communities of Refuge in Frontier Illinois” brings another NMAH curator’s voice to bear on the exhibit. Nancy Davis, Curator of Costume at the NMAH also served as the project director and curator for the *Many Voices* exhibit. Her article follows the stories of three distinct groups of migrant communities whose trajectories led them to settle in western Illinois throughout the 1800s. The article maps the narratives of Free Frank Worter, the Mormon community of Nauvoo, and the Icarian community that would settle in Nauvoo after the departure of the Mormon community there. The

article follows the physical exhibit closely, offering little divergence from its narrative either in terms of displayed objects or textual components.

In contrast to the universalizing perspective of Davis' text, the next piece in the anthology, written by Kym Rice, Director of the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University, begins with a highly detailed account of an object that is not present in the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, but rather is included in the *American Stories* exhibit, also at the NMAH. Rice's article focuses on the life and work of Dave Drake, an enslaved African American artisan and poet who worked at a pottery in South Carolina, and who used some of the pots that he created as a writing surface for his poetry. Rice's text "African American Expression in Antebellum America: The Story of Dave Drake" takes a clay pot created by Drake in 1862 as its point of departure into a closer look at the resistant strategies employed by enslaved people in the southern United States. The deceptively straightforward-looking pot, writes Rice, can "offer insight into the practices embodied in antebellum plantation and industrial slavery but also suggest ways in which enslaved individuals may have maintained their self-identity and exercised agency despite their challenging circumstances" (111). A photograph of the pot taken at close range shows Drake's name "Dave" written on the side of the jar near its mouth. The pots created by Drake, described by Rice as "verse pots", sometimes included short poems and other markings that offer a window into the ways in which pottery functioned as a creative outlet and mode of critical self-expression for Drake. Created in Edgefield, South Carolina at the outset of the Civil War, the featured jar is the only object represented in the article, another stark contrast from the catalogue-like



approach of the earlier pieces, in which several objects are represented in display-like form. Additionally, the jar is represented in numerous photographs taken from various angles, mimicking the experience of looking at an object displayed in a physical exhibit setting, in which a visitor might move around the object, potentially considering its details from an intimate vantage point. This approach to the representation of the object matches the approach that Rice takes to the analysis of the object, which itself looks to the detailed inscriptions found on the surviving jars made by Drake in order to construct a narrative of his life and experience. Rice attends to the fact of Drake's literacy, a skill that he would have likely acquired through having been taught to read the Bible by his enslaver, as well as his work as a typesetter for the small newspapers that his enslaver operated. Rice surmises that Drake's experience working as a typesetter likely prompted him to record the precise date of production on many of his pots, indicating also that he would have had access to a calendar, perhaps hanging in the pottery. Together with the verses written into their sides, the dated verse pots sometimes took on the character of journal entries, in many instances revealing highly personal and intimate material. Although only one pot is represented photographically in the article, Rice's most poignant intervention derives from a close reading of another verse pot, this one created in 1857. Importantly, this pot was created on a Sunday, which would likely have been a designated day of rest for Drake as per the conventions surrounding days off for enslaved African Americans. Perhaps reflecting on the loss of friends and family who may have been sold away, he wrote "I wonder where is all my relations/Friendship to all - and every nation". The production of this particular verse pot on a Sunday further

indicates that Drake may have turned to the pot inscriptions as a way to express his grief and despair, seeking out the solace of writing independently from his work as a potter.



[Fig. 17: Stoneware jar made by enslaved potter Dave Drake on May 3, 1862, *American Stories* exhibit, NMAH, 2020.]

Rice’s article represents a departure from the catalogue-style of writing about exhibits, referencing objects not part of the exhibit, in order to provide an analysis of the potential meanings that close object reading can bring about. In contrast to the rather neutral tone used to describe the life of Frank McWorter in the previous article in the anthology, Rice is clear to mark Drake’s poems as powerful acts of rebellion against the brutality of the racism that undergirded his enslavement, pointing out that Drake “inscribed his pots as the ultimate act of subversion” (116). This type of close object

reading, enhanced by the form of the anthology that allows for deeper textual and photographic engagement with exhibited objects, represents a manner of museum “visiting” that is made possible by creating parallel registers of the exhibit. Rice’s text stands out as a case study in how object-oriented exhibit analysis can amplify the impact exhibition, as well as how much meaning can be lost when such an analysis is absent.

### **Westward Expansion**

The next display case turns to the period of western expansion through the incorporation of California, as well as the vast areas of the ancestral lands of the Niimiipu (Nez Perce), which spread throughout current-day Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Beginning with Mexican California, the exhibit describes the context surrounding the Mexican-American War which took place between 1846-1848, though the exhibit makes brief mention of the conflict itself. The text introduces this section by mentioning that with the incorporation of California into the United States, Mexicans living there were able to choose between relocating to Mexico or becoming American citizens. Despite the option of becoming American citizens that was open to them, the text also indicates that it was difficult for many Mexican landowners to retain rights over their property under the strict laws established by the American government. Intermingled in the story of the Mexican-American War is the history of the California Gold Rush, represented through two gold assayer’s ingots, and a photograph of gold miners taken in 1852.

The thirteen year period between the conclusion of the Mexican-American War and the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861 was one in which tensions surrounding American identity and Manifest Destiny were heightened. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 spurred a wave of new settlement in the area, with people coming from elsewhere in the United States as well as overseas amid tales of gold-lined streets. As historian Susan Lee Johnson has pointed out, the Gold Rush has come to be remembered as “the historical property of Anglo Americans, especially Anglo American men, and came to be associated in everyday language with facile notions of fast fortune” (11). Indeed, the exhibit includes a short text about William Sumner Johnson, a man from Connecticut who traveled across the continent to San Francisco in search of gold, leaving behind letters to his wife, one of which is featured alongside the display. The exhibit moves on to focus on Chinese immigration to California, offering a photograph of Chinese railroad workers, alongside a wok and a sign taken from a Chinese store in California around 1890. This section of the exhibit concludes with a short text about the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, stating that “white laborers considered the Chinese competition and responded with hostility” (Many Voices). Californians were thus at the forefront of efforts to push for exclusionary legislation aimed at curbing Chinese immigration. Although the attention given in this section to the role of Chinese immigrant communities in California provides important context in understanding the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the impression offered by the exhibit nonetheless truncates the history of the Gold Rush in California, setting up a rather reductive dichotomy of white/Chinese that oversimplifies the complexity of the period. As Johnson

argues, the Gold Rush “was among the most multiracial, multiethnic, multinational events that had yet occurred within the boundaries of the United States”, with Mexicans, Chileans, French, African American, Chinese and Indigenous miners working in close proximity, especially in the southern mines (11). In its account of the Gold Rush, the online exhibit replicates the narrow narrative of the period, obfuscating the elements that contributed to the significance of this period in terms of immigration policy, economics and the negotiation of American identity in the new territory of California.

The story of the annexation of California is told through the Del Valle family, a Mexican family who remained in California and succeeded in retaining their land and business even after the Mexican-American War. With several personal objects and photographs of the Del Valle family, the objects speak to an experience that was the exception, rather than the rule, as many *Californios* (Mexican people residing in California) were forced to cede their lands to the American government following the American victory in 1848. Various religious objects are used to describe the manner in which the Del Valle family worked to preserve the Catholic identity of the *Californios* who remained, efforts that included the construction of a chapel on their ranch. Here again, the exhibit offers the story of a family whose experience was the exception in this regard, rather than the rule. The Del Valle family, unlike many other families, were able to successfully retain ownership of their land and property after the incorporation of California, and profited from the increase in demand for cattle as Americans began to settle in California in greater numbers. Once more, the exhibit maintains a focus on the resilience of those who lost their homes, property and culture after the

Mexican-American War, highlighting the instances of resistance and negotiation instead of the devastation caused by the conflict.

The display continues with the story of the appropriation of Niimiipu lands by displaying a range of arrows and a bow, along with a rifle, both of which were used by the Niimiipu in conjunction with horse warfare strategies as they fought to prevent their displacement at the hands of the American army. Beaded horse regalia punctuates the latter part of the display, striking in its brightness against the dull browns and grays of the other objects and photographs in the display case. Again placing a narrative emphasis on resistance, the section showcases several photographs and paintings of Niimiipu leaders, and describes the efforts of the Niimiipu to resist the encroachment on their land by the American government. Echoing the exhibit's earlier mention of the importance of the horse in Indigenous culture since the Spanish introduced the animals in 1600s, the text describes the elaborate horse trappings characteristic of the Niimiipu, as well as their usefulness in bolstering the effectiveness of the nation in terms of trade, hunting and battle. Having already had portions of their land restricted by a treaty, Chief Joseph led his people in a prolonged resistance effort against U.S. forces before finally surrendering in 1877. A drawing titled "The Surrender of Chief Joseph and his Principal Warriors" is shown, depicting a line of Niimiipu men, waiting to hand over their weapons to a group of waiting American soldiers. The idea of surrender depicted in the drawing, and repeated in the corresponding text is of course a crucial element in recounting the Niimiipu story: it effectively supplants the notion of colonisation and unlawful appropriation of land with an idea rooted in meritocratic battle. If the Niimiipu

“surrendered”, it follows that the American military “won”. Further, the representation of the Nimiipu battle as a discrete historical event has the effect of cordoning it off from the other large-scale events of the Civil War period. While the segmentation of historical events is a common and perhaps necessary approach to historiography, Elliott West notes in *The Last Indian War*, this approach can have the result of “distorting our view of how events have worked and built on each other to make the America we have come to know” (xviii). With the online exhibit choosing to focus on the Nimiipu narrative (and, in turn, attending almost not at all to the Civil War), the effects of this segmented view of this pivotal period in American history are enhanced. As West argues:

It’s as if there are two independent historical narratives, and because the one that is set in the East and centered on the Civil War has been tapped as the defining story of its time, the one that is set out West seems peripheral, even largely irrelevant to explaining America during a critical turn of its history. (xix)

For West, the events of the Nez Perce War are integral to a full understanding of American history in the mid-nineteenth century, yet rarely are they considered as being in relationship to the Civil War, and the related expansion of the American Union. The remaking of America during this period was a process that was continental in scope, with implications for how American identity is conceived that persist today.

The last section under the rubric of “Western Migration” examines the migration of two religious communities, the Mormons of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the utopian community of Icarians, to areas along the Illinois frontier. Alongside various photographs and artistic renderings of the areas they settled, the text from this section describes the religious intolerance experienced by these groups,

despite their clear acceptance of many Christian beliefs. For the Mormons, this intolerance resulted in their decision to flee further west in order to avoid persecution. Despite some internal tensions within their community, the Icarians were able to remain in place largely due to strong mercantile relationships that they established. Importantly, the text notes that obtaining American citizenship was a vital step for the Icarians, whose leader, Étienne Cabet, became an American citizen in 1855 and requested that all Icarians follow suit.

At the core of the narrative embedded in the display case on westward expansion is the reality of displacement and migration, two forces that were tethered to American expansionism, making the spread of the nation possible and shaping the new spaces into which it stretched. Attached to the common denominators of displacement and migration lies another foundational element in the story of American expansion: armed conflict. In the wake of each conflict, ideas about American identity were entrenched in law, eventuating in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the unraveling of the rights and protections guaranteed to the Californios who remained in California, and the forced displacement of the Niimiipu to a reservation in Idaho. Indeed, between the Mexican-American and Nez Perce Wars, the story of American expansion could be recast as an epoch of battles, accompanied by the crystallization of the concept of American whiteness that occurred in their wake. The discordance between the conflict-ridden nature of the period and the exhibit's introductory assertion of the shared ideal of a unified nation is striking.



## **Extra-Continental Expansion**

The “Peopling and Expanding the Nation” section culminates with a display about the expansion of the United States into lands beyond its continental borders.

Incentivized by the strategic value of these locations, the United States sought to collect territories deemed to be of commercial and military importance. Although the objects in the display focus largely on Hawai'i and Puerto Rico, the text references the Philippines and Guam as well, both of which were ceded by Spain along with Puerto Rico at the end of the Spanish American War of 1898. A harpoon used for whaling and a knife for trimming pineapples is shown alongside a collection of photographs of whaling expeditions and pineapple plantations, referencing the commercial interests that prompted the American annexation of the islands. The pineapple plantations, the accompanying text explains, were typically worked by low-paid Hawai'ian workers, as the island shifted away from a subsistence economy to a cash-based economy. A portrait of Queen Liliuokalani, is displayed next to two coins of the Hawaiian Kingdom from the 1800s.



[Figure 18: P. 31 1899 portrait of Queen Lili'uokalani, last sovereign monarch of the Hawaiian Kingdom, *Many Voices One Nation* exhibit, NMAH, 2020.]

As political scientist Noenoe Silva (2004) writes, “Creating a nation in a form familiar to Europe and the United States was a necessary strategy of resistance to colonisation because there was a chance that the nineteenth-century Mana Nui, or “Great Powers” might recognize national sovereignty” (9). The coins and monarchical portrait belie the loss of sovereignty that characterized the years leading up to the coup of 1893, and function to obfuscate the calculated steps taken by American business to whittle away at the powers of the monarchy and to suppress the ability of native

Hawaiians to participate in the political process. As Silva argues, Native Hawaiian resistance to American colonialism and to the annexation of Hawai'i has been minimized in mainstream American historiography, and the exhibit's treatment of these events fails to acknowledge the extent of this resistance.

The American acquisition of Puerto Rico is explored through a collection of musical instruments and other references to the role of sugar in the island's economy. A religious sculpture featuring the Three Kings serves as a reference to the racial and ethnic diversity of Puerto Rico, with one of the kings being depicted as having Black skin in what is described as possibly the earliest representation of a person of African descent in Puerto Rican art. Lastly, an 1899 photograph of Puerto Rican soldiers who had enlisted in the American Colonial Army hints at the quick transition that the island underwent from Spanish colony to U.S. territory. The display features a sugar sack from the 1900s from the Porto [sic] Rican American Sugar Refinery in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Next to the sugar sack, there is a photograph of Puerto Rican sugar plantation workers in the field, cutting cane around 1942. The ruse of racialized colonial ideology is apparent in the disconnect between the wealth, resources and labor extracted from the island, and its continued status as an outlier in relation to the United States. Often referred to as a "commuter nation", Puerto Rico's relationship of continual migration with the United States, together with its liminal status as a territory in a system where statehood is highly valued, position it at the periphery of national identity. As Laura Briggs argues in *Reproducing Empire* (2002), the fact that so many Americans hold the belief that Puerto Ricans are not Americans is not accidental. She maintains that this

ignorance is “produced and maintained through silences in the media, in popular culture, and in the teaching of U.S. history, which exist alongside a prominent public narrative in which the U.S. is a major anti-imperialist force in the world...” (2). In the context of ongoing debates about the economic responsibility of the American government towards Puerto Rico in the aftermath of hurricane Maria which raved the island in 2017, the continued financial benefits reaped by American companies operating on Puerto Rican soil reveal the colonial logic that territories are valuable only so long as they generate profits for the mother country.

While the histories of American expansion are represented in the exhibit with corresponding examples of resistance, there is a glaring incongruence between the anti-imperial fervor described in the first section of the exhibit, with the stories of expansion and annexation described in the “Peopling” section. The logic of Manifest Destiny effectively absolved the United States of hypocrisy, instilling white supremacy as the primary organizing principle in the face of African American, Indigenous, Mexican, Hawai’ian and Puerto Rican resistance, and ultimately positioning the United States as the fulfilling its destiny through forms of domination that it had previously resisted.

## Chapter Six

### Visualizing the Future in Historical Accounts of Race and Community

The third section of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit, called “Creating Community: Chicago and Los Angeles, 1900-1965” takes up the question of group identification amid the process of urbanization in America during the early part of the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of the continued settlement of the western portions of the continent, the process of urbanization came to shape the contours of American social identity in critical ways during this period. At the same time, new waves of immigration to the United States from around the globe continued, while the internal migration of African Americans from southern to northern states brought large shifts in the social and political life of the country. While urbanization was by no means a uniquely American phenomenon, the processes of identity formation enabled by emerging urban formations were marked by the broader national tensions of assimilation, difference, belonging and entitlement. The process of urbanization, and the new forms of identification that surfaced as a result of it, impacted the economic, racial, religious, linguistic, legislative and architectural landscapes of American cities in ways that in turn impacted persistent notions of Americanness.

The “Creating Community” section of the *Many Voices* exhibit takes a close look at the development of two urban centers, Chicago and Los Angeles, in order to explore the impact of urban spaces on American national identity. The midwestern and west coast locations of the two showcased cities expand the narrative of urban development that so often hinges on New York City as the quintessential case study in American

urbanization. The theme of arrivals and migration carries throughout the section, underscoring the emergence of the newly-formed identities of Americans of European descent who had been born in America, versus those whose more recent arrival placed them in competition over resources and opportunities. The period of time covered by this section of the exhibit also overlaps with the movement of large numbers of African Americans from southern to northern states, as many sought to flee the domestic terrorism wrought by segregation and violence in the Jim Crow south.

The questions posed of this section of the exhibit take the form of interrogations about terminology around two key elements. The first concerns the appearance of the term “native-born American”, and questions the lexical relationship between Native American, a term used throughout the first two sections of the exhibit, and native-born American, a term used to distinguish between second or third generation Americans of European descent, and those who arrived during the first decades of the twentieth century. The second question concerns the invocation of the term community, and asks what effects are produced by the frequent reference to the term to describe life during a period of intensive social and political upheaval in the United States. Using the concept of futurity, I ask how renditions of the past rely on aspirations for the future in order to produce meaning for present-day audiences.

### **Exploring Futurity in Historical Museum Exhibits**

Historical museums are spaces of cultural production in which the relationship between disparate temporal realities is crystallized. On the one hand, historical

museums purport to represent past events of significance, to gather objects emblematic of those events, and to recount the movement between points in time with linearity and logic. On the other hand, these activities are always undertaken in the present, by institutions and individuals operating within the timeframe of the present. Finally, the project of representing the past is undertaken with future audiences and constituencies in mind, not only in the sense of future museum visitors, but in the sense of projecting and preparing a platform for narratives of the future to emerge from the material of the historical exhibit. The interconnectedness of these temporal registers mean that a historical museum exhibit is always speaking about, representing, and imagining the present and future, at the same time that it operates under the rubric of the past.

In the museum space, research on futurity can seem out-of-place. Museums, after all, are spaces associated with the past, with remembrance, preservation and archive. In “Whiteness and Futurity”, Andrew Baldwin suggests that a focus on the past can obscure the ways in which worlds are configured and maintained. The preemption of the imagined future can determine and impact the trajectories of the present, and in this sense, exhibiting the past is deeply entwined with bringing the future into being. As Baldwin argues, the “here-and-now of the psyche or of collective mood is shaped by the yet-to-come”, meaning that outcomes are quite literally shaped by perceptions of the future (173). The future can exist and be experienced as a void of certainty; a period of time yet to manifest that is characterized by doubt and unpredictability. At the same time, the future can also exist as the anticipated product of a sequence of events; an imagined (or even hoped-for) outcome that ensues from a series of previous moments

in time. In developing historical narratives that aim to interpret the past for audiences of the present and future, our understanding of historical museum exhibits can benefit from future-oriented study that foregrounds the question of how references and suggestions of futurity are embedded in representations of the past.

In his work on national museums, Donald Preziosi describes a triad of processes that are at play in national museums and the object-lessons that they perform for their audiences. Preziosi contends that alongside the work of collecting objects and imbuing them with significance, there are processes of recollection (calling forth the past) and de-collecting, which he describes as the “deliberate erasure of past meanings and functions through the liquidation or sequestering of what are taken as their relics” (59). It is through appreciation of this matrix of collection, recollection and de-collection, argues Preziosi, that we can make it possible to “critically investigate” the national museum narratives (59). Where the American national narrative is concerned, the national museum is called upon to present as cohesive that which is fractured; to represent a past characterized by the most violent of conflicts as one that has led to an imagined unity. What mechanisms must a national museum employ in order to efface the past as well as represent it? How do the aims of national unity in the past shape those of the present, and how are national museums brought into the fold of the work of national cohesion?

The very title of the section suggests a connection between community building and the process of urbanization in the United States, bringing the questions of group identity and belonging to the fore. While urbanization is a phenomenon often associated



with an increase in alienation, disconnection and anonymity, the framing of this section of the exhibit asks us to consider what the particularities of urbanization in the American context during this period might be. How do the stories of urban life and development represented in the exhibit relate to the exhibit's overarching theme of "many voices" contributing to the creation of "one nation"? What assumptions about belonging are embedded within the exhibit language, as it endeavors to represent this formative period in American history? As a vehicle through which to imagine the future of the United States, what ideas does the exhibit project in its association between community, city life and social diversity? Finally, what possible futures might it inhibit by maintaining the absence of certain pasts?

The physical exhibit and the exhibit anthology engage very differently with these questions. Where the physical exhibit hones in on the stories of urbanization in Chicago and Los Angeles with a focus on community building, the anthology brings together four texts introduced by an article by NMAH curator Fath Davis Ruffins called "Contesting the Nation, 1900-1965". Following her engagement with the effects of racism in post-reconstruction America, three additional articles explore the time period through the lens of English-language education (Troyano and Schaefer-Jacobs), urban planning in Chicago, and finally translational adoption of Korean children after the Korean War (Kim). I argue that each register of the exhibit produces very distinct narratives by putting forward divergent concepts about the future. On the one hand, the physical exhibit describes urbanization in generative terms, as a process that bolstered social cohesion. On the other hand, the anthology explores the deep chasms that persisted in

the post-reconstruction era, as well as the new tensions that emerged as the politics of assimilation were variously debated, resisted and put into practice.

### **Race and Chicago's Concentric Design**

The introductory text about Chicago states that by 1890, the city was “booming with a population of one million” and that “80% were either foreign born or the children of immigrants.” The text further describes Chicago as “a city of neighborhoods” in which various groups of immigrant populations negotiated their place alongside one another (Many Voices). Describing the families who moved into Chicago’s Near West Side as coming from “diverse ethnic backgrounds”, the text explains that residents “created vibrant communities despite poverty and unsafe living and working conditions” (Many Voices). A 1907 photograph of children at play in the Marshal Swenie playground in the Near West Side neighborhood shows children playing behind a fence topped with barbed wire, the enclosed area surrounded by tall, brick buildings. To the right, a photograph of activist Jane Addams shows her sitting among a group of children outside of the Hull House, a settlement house that she co-founded in 1889. The final image shows a depiction of the Hull House settlement from a postcard. A short paragraph next to the images, titled “Jane Addams, Founder and Visionary”, describes Addams as a “progressive era reformer” and founder of the Hull House, adding that the programs offered through the Hull House “revolutionized the methods of social work”, eventually earning her a Nobel Prize.



[Fig. 19: Cofounder Jane Addams with children at Hull House, 1933. *Courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago Library, JAMC 0000 0030 0058*]

The first neighborhood of focus is Pilsen, an area named after the European city of Pilsen, which was home to a growing Czech community until the 1960s when many Czech families sought to relocate to the suburban areas surrounding Chicago, making way for Mexican families to enter the neighborhood. The text informs us that “Mexicans had fewer options”, and that they were forced to relocate from their “long-established communities” due to construction projects. The artifacts chosen to accompany the text on the page are mostly photographs, and the availability of photography marks a turn

away from objects in the exhibit, with only a single candlestick and a pipe shown as objects from the Czech community that once called Pilsen home. The text suggests that in addition to hosting celebrations and establishing businesses, the emergence of “Mexican Pilsen” allowed the community to “foster a culture of political activism” (Pilsen). The final photograph, an aerial view of a Pilsen intersection as Mexican Independence Day celebrations unfold, provides a glimpse into the sense of community that shaped the neighborhood.

The next neighborhood explored in the exhibit is Chinatown, represented under the title “Creating a New Chinatown”, in order to distinguish between the original Chinese neighborhood located in the downtown area, from which the Chinese community was forced to resettle amid growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the early twentieth century. Chicago’s South Side then became the “new” Chinatown, with the epicenter of business located in the On Leong Merchants Association whose impressive building is represented by an artist’s rendition dating from 1926. The next paragraph in the exhibit describes the experiences of ‘Paper Sons’ - Chinese boys who entered the United States after the Chinese Exclusion Act using falsified documents that showed them to be the sons of existing Chinese-American citizens. Until the act was repealed in 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act identified this group as the only immigrants from China who could enter the United States, creating an underground economy of smugglers whose services were contracted in order to assist young men in their pursuit of immigration. The exhibit text notes that those who attempted to enter the United States as ‘Paper Sons’ did so “at great personal risk” (*Many Voices*). A photograph from

around 1940 of a boy named Eugene Kung, identified as a Paper Son who lived in Chicago's Chinatown, is shown alongside a document labeled as a Paper Son training book, which would have been used to study biographical information in order to prove his falsified identity to immigration examiners. The Chinese Exclusion Act, while referenced as the underlying reason for this form of "illegal" immigration, is given very little explanation in the exhibit text. The impression gleaned from the limited description of Chicago's Chinatown is one in which the fact of illegal immigration is given an outsized presence, making it a focal point of the attempt to describe a neighbourhood and community.

The Swedish neighborhood of Lakeview is the next area explored. The page contains only two photographs of objects, with the text offering the bulk of the information about the neighborhood that was home to the Julian Theater, a movie theater that would show Swedish-language films until its closure in the 1930s. A playbill from the Julian Theater is shown, along with a photograph of an architectural detail from the theater. The Bronzeville neighborhood is the next subject of the online exhibit, and in contrast to the scant artifacts offered in relation to the Lakeview neighborhood, this page offers ten images of objects and photographs representing a range of elements of life in Bronzeville. The issue of poor housing conditions that plagued the area is explored alongside the religious life of the community, with its close ties to Gospel and ragtime music. An image of a stone carving of a Star of David from the Pilgrim Baptist Church - whose choir was made notorious by its conductor, blues artist Thomas A. Dorsey - reveals the church's former life as a synagogue. The history of the Jewish

community whose place of worship was repurposed is not explored, though their trajectory is hinted at in the introductory text on the page. The text explains that by the 1930's, the Bronzeville neighborhood was home to a quarter of a million African American migrants "most of them from the rural South", and that as a consequence of their arrival, "nearby white residents fled to other parts of the city and the suburbs" (Bronzeville). The text introduces one of the defining features of Chicago: the "Black Belt" that separated white and Black Chicagoans from one another, and which endures today as a central characteristic of the city.

The final section of the online exhibit explores the Near West Side, a neighborhood that was home to a large and diverse community of immigrants of European descent. Described in the short text as a neighborhood of "transition", the exhibit text explains that inhabitants "created vibrant communities despite poverty and unsafe living and working conditions" (Near West Side). A 1907 photograph of the Marshal Swenie playground in the neighborhood is shown beneath the text, before the page transitions to the Hull House, a settlement house described in the text as offering "practical assistance, vocational training, and social and cultural activities to Chicago's working class and immigrant populations" (Near West Side). A photograph of Jane Addams, cofounder of the Hull House, is shown next to a postcard with an artist's rendition of the Hull House. In the photograph, Addams sits on the steps of a building amid a group of young children. In both the photograph of the playground and the photograph of Jane Addams, an unspoken whiteness is shown: we are left to assume that the immigrant communities of the Near West Side were of European origin, though

nothing in the exhibit text other than the *absence* of a racial or ethnic descriptor is present to guide our thinking. Taken alongside the other neighbourhoods that form the subjects of this section of the exhibit, this page reveals how the idea of whiteness becomes centralized in historical representations of the United States, at the same time that vocabularies of racialized difference become tethered to non-white groups. Chinatown and Bronzeville are associated with illegal immigration and segregation, and the emergence of “Mexican Pilsen” is connected to gentrification and the white flight to the suburban areas surrounding the city. In contrast, Czech Pilsen and Lakeview are characterized by film, the preservation of language and social organizations. Surely, the constitution of the Czech and Swedish communities, as well as the neighbourhood of the Near West Side had everything to do with racial segregation as well - yet a description of segregation as a “white” issue is foreclosed in the exhibit text. Instead, the overarching narratives emerging from the Bronzeville and Chinatown sections rely on vocabularies of hardship and marginalization that connect themselves with ease to non-white bodies.

### **Whiteness and Assimilation in Los Angeles**

The section focusing on Los Angeles begins with a description of the city as one that has been shared by Mexico, Spain and the United States since its founding in 1781. The introductory text goes on to remark that while the quest for improved economic and social possibilities drove many to move to Los Angeles, several obstacles stood in the way of equal access to opportunities. The text proceeds to describe the

effects of white and Anglophone supremacy: “Many Hollywood stars Anglicized their surnames to succeed there; Mexican immigrants had limited opportunities and ultimately faced mass deportation; and, during World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes and businesses” (Los Angeles). The opening description of the city stands in contrast to the final sentence of the introductory text: in the first instance, the promise of the city as a locus of cultural encounter is highlighted. Following this, we are offered a description of the unevenness with which this promise was experienced by the city’s various residents.

With a large 1920 photograph of the Los Angeles cityscape as the backdrop to the display case, the exhibit hones in on the neighborhood of La Plaza, the site of the founding of Los Angeles by “forty-four settlers of Native American, African and European heritage” (Los Angeles). The text indicates that the area used to be inhabited by the Native American Tongva tribe, along with Spanish and Mexican inhabitants. The text concludes by stating that by the 1920s, a “multiracial population” consisting of Italian, French, Chinese, Japanese and Mexican American residents lived in the neighborhood. The exhibit showcases a bakery called La Esperanza, established initially in 1918 as a residential business by Ezequiel Moreno, a native of Zacatecas, Mexico, and eventually opened in a commercial building in La Plaza in the 1920s. The original storefront sign used in the 1950s, on loan from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, is displayed, accompanied by an explanation of the symbolism of the imagery and color scheme on the sign. The red, white and green colors are reflective of Moreno’s Mexican heritage, while the image of the ship anchor is meant to



reference the process of putting down roots in a new home. The bakery is used as a focal point in a broader narrative of communal urban life, in which “immigrants, downtown employees, and Hollywood movie stars came for bread, coffee, traditional Mexican dishes, and “American-style” lunches” (Los Angeles). Examples of dishes used at La Esperanza are displayed, along with historical photographs of the bakery taken in the 1940s and 1950s respectively.



[Fig. 20- 21: La Esperanza, La Plaza/El Pueblo, downtown Los Angeles, c. 1950  
*Courtesy of the Moreno family*; Outdoor neon marquee sign from La Esperanza, c.  
1950, History Collections, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.]

Down the street from La Esperanza, a Japanese American-owned grocery store called Mercado Plaza, owned by the Shishima family, formed another commercial point of convergence. The exhibit tells the story of the strong family ties that developed between the Shishima family and the Moreno family, and that the Shishimas lived in the residential quarters above La Esperanza bakery. The Shishima and Moreno families “worked together, supported one another, and celebrated each other’s successes,” states the display text. Beneath an enlarged photograph from the 1950s of La Esperanza bakery are two photos of the Shishima family. The first shows two young children, Takeshi and Bill Shishima in the family store around 1928, the second is of the whole Shishima family in 1944, standing outside of a temporary residence in an incarceration camp in 1944. The exhibit text describes the effects of Executive Order 9066, which in 1942, empowered the United States War Relocation Authority to deport Japanese Americans to incarceration camps, stripping them of their homes, businesses and personal possessions. Above the two photographs of the Shishima family, an example of the identification tags worn by incarcerated Japanese Americans is shown, alongside a reproduction of a Civilian Exclusion Order instruction poster from 1942.

The simultaneity of utopian and dystopian representations of Los Angeles permeates the exhibit, with accounts of the early years of the film industry colliding with the social ramifications of World War II. The abundance of contrasting narratives created about the city exemplifies the capacity of narrativization to shape material realities in urban landscapes. Fictional accounts of life in Los Angeles, found in the works of writers such as Chester Himes (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945 and *Lonely*

*Crusade*, 1947), Nathaniel West (*Miss Lonelyhearts* 1933 and *The Day of the Locust*, 1939), and John Steinbeck (*Grapes of Wrath*, 1939) have contributed to the wealth of narrative material that has shaped the life of the city in both figurative and material terms. As author Mike Davis argues in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990), the history of cultural representations produced about Los Angeles became a “material force in the city’s actual evolution” (20). The divergent accounts of the city’s past pervade the exhibit’s account of early twentieth century Los Angeles.

### **Narratives of Urbanization in America**

American cities occupied a central position in the project of nation-building, as crucial sites of negotiation, appropriation, hybridity and conflict in the first half of the twentieth century. As urbanization unfurled across the globe at a rapid pace beginning in the 1800s, urbanization in the American context was shaped by the particularities of the settler-agrarian ethos. As Daniel Judah Elazar argues in *Building Cities in America*, the agricultural foundations of early American settlement, coupled with the frontier logic in which American cities were established gives the question of American urbanization a particular shape in relation to the formation of American national identity. In contrast to the cities of Europe, Elazar argues that American cities are places in which the “agrarian commitments of American culture are deliberately carried over into the American city...” as well as sites in which the inherent problems of urban living are acutely apparent (xi). The American city, for Elazar, stands out precisely because it has been the site of enactment of agrarian virtues of “self-reliance and family solidarity”, all

within the larger context of a “cooperating community of freeholders where class distinctions are minimal” (10). American cities, then, have provided a crucial environment for the formation of communities and group identity within the United States, even as they have been the backdrop for manifestations of social rupture and divisiveness.

Given the seemingly contradictory forces of agrarian ideals on the one hand, and the realities of urban living on the other, what impact did urbanization have on conceptions of American identity? While Americans moved to city centers in great numbers during the twentieth century, there remained what Elazar calls a “crucial ambivalence” towards the city, that pushed Americans to transpose their agrarian ideals onto their new urban contexts (11). The economic advantages to city life were very compelling - enough to encourage people from rural areas to relocate in search of better jobs and opportunities, as well as to draw new immigrants to settle in urban settings rather than attempt to establish themselves in rural communities as many had done in the nineteenth century and earlier. Although the economic logic of city life was attractive, many communities sought to retain crucial aspects of rural life in their new urban homes. As such, the American relationship to the city during this period was characterized by attempts to remake the elements of rural life in a new environment, to reinterpret agrarian ideals through the establishment of a “modified pattern of “rural”-style living within an urban context” (11). The small-town, frontier-inspired ideals that many Americans brought with them to their new urban homes gave definition and

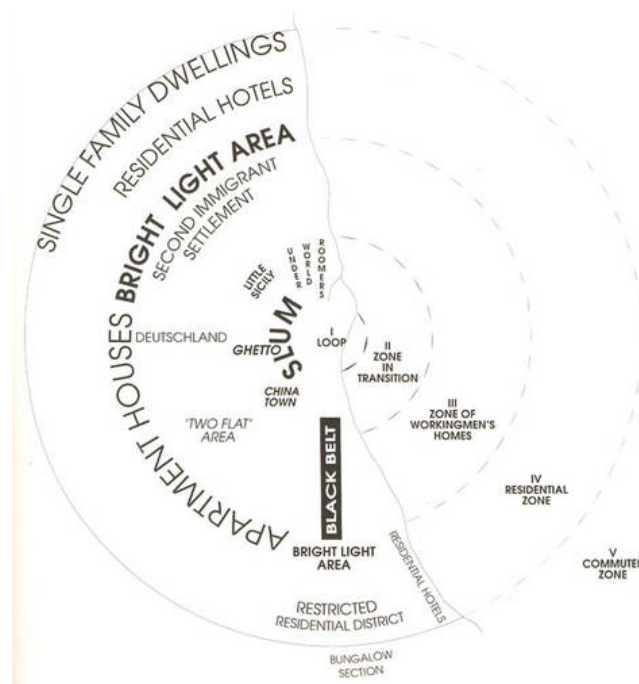
shape to the group identities that formed the contours of American urban life in the twentieth century.

If there existed an ambivalence towards cities among the people who flocked to them in the early part of the twentieth century, this ambivalence was reflected in the establishment of institutions and practices that blended rural ideals with urban realities. These institutions and practices, writes Elazar, were intended to “evoke rural and small-town America and its traditional way of life” (12). The design of local government, typically limited in its scope, is one example of the manner in which rural ideals shaped American urbanization. With several smaller municipalities operating within a larger urban whole, this design replicated in both abstract and direct terms the forms of government that were “central to traditions of local control” (12). Indeed, the persistence of localized efforts to maintain smaller administrative structures continues to be a mainstay in many American urban spaces, in which local libraries, schools, business associations and infrastructure are of great significance to the identity of the neighborhoods in which they are embedded. The concept of homeownership remains one of the most central symbols of personal independence in contemporary America, and it is supported through a host of home-buying programs and tax provisions that facilitate the purchase of a residence.<sup>8</sup> Even amidst the urban boom of the first half of the twentieth century, notions of ownership were literalized in the development of garden communities and single-family dwellings, marking a departure from approaches to planning that sought to encourage higher-density living. The distinct characteristics of

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<sup>8</sup> For a critique of the importance placed on homeownership in American society, together with a discussion of the social and economic ramifications of undervaluing rental housing in favor of homeownership, see Kristen Adams (2009).

the process of urbanization in America therefore functioned to bring individuals together, even as it put social differences in relief with one another, exacerbating many of the chasms that had shaped conceptions of American identity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The frontier logic of settlement, coupled with the notion of individual freedom, combined with ideas of group identification to form communities of individuals who shared similar racial, ethnic, religious and, to some degree, socio-economic characteristics.



[Fig. 22: Map of Chicago's concentric zones as depicted by University of Chicago sociologists Ernest Burgess and Robert Park in 1925, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Illinois.]

In his article "Chicago's Concentric Zones" included in the exhibit anthology, historian Davarian Baldwin brings a focus on the history of urban planning in Chicago.

Developed by sociologist Ernest Burgess in the 1920s, the mapping of Chicago's constitution along the lines of a series of widening circles known as the concentric zones marked the introduction of a way of thinking about the city that suggested that "natural" elements, dynamics and tendencies were what shaped the city, and that these trends could not be readily altered by social interventions such as those introduced by Jane Addams via the establishment of the Hull House settlement house. In contrast to the idea that a city could be planned, managed and manipulated, what came to be known as the "Chicago School" of sociology sought to explain the inner workings of a city in terms of the "natural" dynamics imposed upon it by its residents. The famous "Urban Areas" map, along with its corresponding theories, "justified racial inequality in urban development as a natural byproduct of immigration, new industries and city growth" (180). Chicago's rapid rate of growth and industrialization, as well as its strategic geographic position midway between the resources of the west and the financial hubs of the east, made it an attractive case study for the urban sociologists of the University of Chicago who described the city variously as a "living textbook" and a "sociological laboratory" (182). Rather than understand social and economic inequalities as products of human design, the Chicago School saw these as natural and inevitable consequences of social mixity in urban spaces. As Baldwin argues, this approach served to justify complacency with the rampant inequities that shaped the city: "This use of a biological metaphor helped identify the dynamic influx and physical location of new migrants, but also rationalized the dramatic inequalities in their living and work conditions" (182). Crucially, the resolution of the tensions inherent in the concentric

zones model was described by the Chicago School sociologists in terms of a process of “assimilation” that would lead to a form of peaceful coexistence (182). The racial hierarchy that positioned the white Anglo-Protestant as the ideal citizen was clearly at work in this formulation, in which assimilation is understood as the path to social harmony. Further, the characterization of the trajectory from inequality to harmony as “natural” contained within it a prescription for inaction and non-intervention, challenging the efforts of activists and reformers who sought to interrupt patterns of poverty and violence in the city.

### **Internal (Im)migration and Domestic Terrorism**

In order to understand the impetus behind the internal migration of people to and from urban centers in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, we might follow their steps backwards, to the homes that they left behind, by way of tracing their trajectories through the economic, political and cultural elements that lay at the core of their decisions to migrate. In his research about shifting urban patterns in Atlanta, Georgia, Kevin Kruse outlines the rise of white supremacist political organizing that occurred in the wake of desegregation efforts. By analyzing the successful political campaigns of politicians such as three-time Governor of Georgia Gene Talmadge, Kruse shows how the disenfranchisement of African Americans and the county unit system that gave each county in Georgia equal weight in election outcomes regardless of population “ensured that Georgia’s politics would be dominated by the forces of rural racism for decades” (21). The example of Atlanta is but one example of the



pervasiveness of the oppression faced by African Americans living in the south, the exploration of which is vital to understanding the dynamics that produced the Great Migration in the early twentieth century.

Urbanization in twentieth century America was not an even experience, and the legacies of chattel slavery defined the patterns of migration towards cities as many African Americans sought to escape the threat of violence under Jim Crow legislation. The large-scale relocation of African Americans from southern states to northern cities that began in the early twentieth century forms a parallel story to that of the urban migration of Americans of European descent. In contrast to the largely economic motivations that underlaid the move to urban centers for many Americans of European descent, the northward migration of African Americans constituted both a search for freedom, as well as an escape from the pervasive violence and discrimination of the southern states. In *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective* (1991), Nell Irvin Painter explores the underpinnings of the migration of African Americans through the axis of immigration. While immigration is a term that cannot describe the arrival of enslaved Africans to the United States, Painter suggests that immigration might be a useful lens through which to view the northward migration of Black Americans in the early twentieth century. The migration away from the southern states was motivated by questions of safety, opportunity, and economic stability, elements that lie at the core of the American immigration experience. "In this sense," writes Painter, "the Great Migration of the early twentieth century represents for African-Americans both immigration and freedom. These were voluntary movements, initiated by the individual

or the family, in pursuit of what they saw as their own best interests” (ix). As such, what might fall under the rubric of urbanization in America, can perhaps be better understood as a kind of internal immigration: a departure from one set of oppressive legal, economic and social prescriptions, towards a society that promised better outcomes for individuals and families alike. This aspect of American urbanization underscores the fractured nature of the United States in the post civil war era and beyond, a nation whose borders belied its ruptured nature.

Northward migration was also intimately connected to the exercise of political power, and a desire to escape the disenfranchisement of the south that offered few opportunities to influence the political process and work for the end of segregation. Through the organizing efforts of Black southerners living outside of the southern states, the issue of civil rights was put before American politicians, bringing it to the fore as a question of political importance in the 1950s and 60s. In this sense, the Great Migration was as much a political movement (or, in another sense, a movement with significant political consequences) that allowed Black southerners in the “diaspora” to organize towards effecting substantive political change from their new positions outside of the southern states. As Painter points out, the Great Migration was facilitated by a series of human networks that often resulted in there being several stops for individuals and families along the way to their new homes in northern states, mimicking in some ways the networks of the underground railroad by providing travelers with information, respite along their journey, and in many cases resources upon their arrival to their new homes (xi). Painter suggests that the subsequent “return” of many Black southerners to their

former homes in southern states beginning in the 1970s mirrors the trajectories of those American immigrants who returned to their homelands after earning money in the United States, though of course the similarities have their limitations. After all, Black Americans migrated within the context of a singular set of national borders, even as they moved between a starkly contrasting set of social realities. Painter concludes that “through their “immigrant” experience,” African Americans who migrated from (and sometimes back to) the southern states, have “profoundly altered the culture that all late twentieth century Americans share” (x). As a central component of the story of internal migration in twentieth century America, the Great Migration forms an integral piece of the narrative of urbanization, social change and community-building within America’s cities.

In her article titled “Contesting the Nation”, NMAH curator Fath Davis Ruffins. By positioning the question of racialization at the threshold of this period in U.S. history, the anthology shifts the central focus of this section of the exhibit, investigating racism as a foundational element in the forging of American life. Ruffins begins with W.E.B. Du Bois’ statement that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”, concluding that by the end of his life in 1963 (that fateful year that saw so many consequential manifestations of resistance to American racism), his statement had been proven correct (137). Ruffins takes 1900 as the literal starting point for her investigation of this period, arguing that in 1900, “most native-born white Americans believed that an Anglo-Protestant white supremacist racial hierarchy was crucial for national stability and identity”, leading them to the logical conclusion that newcomers should assimilate “as

soon as possible” (137). Ruffins describes the political counterpart to this ideology, manifested in the nativist movement in which legislation aimed at restricting non-European immigration was introduced throughout the United States. Using Du Bois’ life as an underlying comparative timeline, Ruffins points out that by the end of his life, civil rights legislation designed to counteract nativist policies was being put in place, reflecting what Ruffins describes as a change in views among Americans (138). By the 1970s, argues Ruffins, the idea of the United States as a “nation of nations” seemed to be shared by many, and while the idea of the U.S. as a pluralist society prevailed in public discourse, Ruffins points out that there also existed “massive resistance” to the civil rights movement and to the characterization of the United States as diverse. Amid these tensions, a period of intensive organizing at many levels of American society took shape to challenge the “centuries-old system of white racial hierarchy” (139). Ruffins thus describes her article as an exploration of the advocacy efforts and political movements that shaped new possibilities in legislation, education, and housing throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

In her exploration of competing beliefs about race and ethnicity in early twentieth century American society, Ruffins describes the diffuse nature of the American state, which, by the 1920s, consisted of the mainland U.S., as well as Puerto Rico, Hawai’i, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, in addition to the unofficial colonies of Cuba and the Philippines. Coupled with the realities of the social and political upheaval in many eastern European countries, the geographic breadth of aspiring immigrants to the United States was substantial. Ruffins explores the discursive construction of racial

hierarchies, expressed, disseminated and reproduced through various avenues, including trade cards, advertisements, postcards, and commercial signage, to name a few examples. Interestingly, many of the visual examples offered in the text are not taken from the larger physical exhibit, further suggesting that the piece is not understood by the author as a mere companion to the physical exhibit, but rather as a stand-alone analysis of racial and ethnic difference in early twentieth century America.

The upholding of racial hierarchies in American society is what leads to the conception of “passing” as white - which upholds the American infatuation with seeing color as a characteristic that can be read *on* the body, quite literally in terms of skin tone and other racialized physical markers. The images included in the chapter include a portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois, an 1882 trade card for the Keystone Manufacturing Company of Sterling, Illinois and a white pointed hood worn by a member of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The objects assembled by Ruffins confront the ideology of white supremacy, as well as Darwinian conceptions of racial hierarchy popularized through various forms of public and commercial images.

Crucially, Ruffins points out that while images of Uncle Sam, and later Lady Liberty, welcoming newcomers from around the world abounded, there were often contradictions embedded within the images themselves. For example, even while the ban on immigration from China was in place, stereotypes of Chinese people were often found among the foreigners being welcomed to America (see fig. 1). Clearly, a strong attachment to the idea of the United States as a welcoming nation existed, even as efforts to exclude and disenfranchise certain groups persisted. The emergence of

anxieties around the idea of “national character”, and its susceptibility to be manipulated by the influx of newcomers shaped public discourse in powerful ways. As Ruffins writes:

“Political, social and religious leaders often invoked this term as a nod to the widespread understanding that “national character” depended upon the maintenance not only of white supremacy in relation to all people of color, but also the unchallenged notion that British and northern European laws, customs, language and religious traditions had always been, and should always be, the fundamental organizing element of American society” (140).

Although American national character was understood as being under siege by the influx of foreigners, Ruffins points to the fluid conceptions of whiteness that began to take shape in American society, allowing immigrants from Eastern European countries to effectively “become” white, despite the fact that they did not neatly match the archetype of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant citizen. Conversely, mounting concerns about the integrity of American identity led to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, which placed limits on the numbers of people who could immigrate to the United States from the southern and eastern regions of Europe, indicating the contested nature not only of American identity, but also the extent of its interwovenness with changing conceptions of whiteness. From here, Ruffins moves into a discussion of the “Americanization movement”, a label for the range of efforts espoused by both community, religious and governmental organizations to “preserve their traditions, values, and the nation’s “Anglo-dominant” character” (141). Citing the introduction of the term “melting pot”, Ruffins offers examples of attempts at Americanization, such as the “melting pot” graduation ceremony sponsored by the Ford Motor Company for its employees who graduated from the Ford English School. During the ceremony,

employees would literally cast off their ethnic clothes and flags from their countries of origin, in order to symbolically assimilate into Anglo-American culture. A photograph of the event, taken in 1916 shows the participants waving American flags, with the motto E Pluribus Unum written above the stage (141). Referencing the image of the Ku Klux Klan hood, Ruffins points out that some forms of resistance to immigration was pointedly violent, and built on the foundations of white supremacist racism that upheld the institution of slavery since the earliest moments of the nation's founding. In contrast to the happenstance approach of the online exhibit to the establishment of different neighborhoods, Ruffins' text draws clear parallels between racist ideologies and patterns of urbanization and neighborhood development. As a consequence of racial and ethnic prejudice, Ruffins notes that "most cities were made up of neighborhoods defined by ethnic/racial boundaries of language, national origin, religion, and other customs, making them easily identifiable targets" (143). The concept of "community" in this context, represents a different kind of social sorting, pointing to the manner in which neighborhoods and vulnerability to racist attacks have so often gone hand in hand.

Ruffins recounts the story of the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, along with an account of the emergence of philosopher Horace Kallen's concept of "cultural pluralism" around the same period. Kallen's ideas challenged the notion of Anglo-Saxon superiority, and led to the increased use of hyphenated identities among Americans (145). Ruffins continues her article with an overview of segregation laws, and considers how World War II and the Cold War functioned both to galvanize a sense of shared American identity, while at

the same time upholding many long-standing racist practices, beliefs and laws. The U.S. military had been segregated since the mid-nineteenth century, with different racial groups serving on different units. Ruffins points out that “the ironies of fighting against the racist, anti-Semitic Third Reich with segregated troops were clearly visible to many” (147). Amid these contradictions, there appeared the first government-sponsored imagery of African American war heroes, such as the poster of Navy messman Dorie Miller who served on the *U.S.S. West Virginia* when the United States was attacked by Japan at Pearl Harbor in 1941 (see fig. 2). The celebration of American democratic values clashed with the Soviet depictions of racist violence in America, and the hypocrisy of American democratic values was exposed both at home and abroad, lending strength and momentum to efforts to bring about justice in the United States. Despite the changes taking place at various levels of American society, Ruffins argues that other forms of discrimination, such as within the realms of housing and access to credit, meant that many Black Americans were not able to build wealth as white Americans were able to do in the favourable economic climate that followed the second World War (151). It was also during this period that laws and housing covenants that discriminated against Jews were declared illegal, thereby marking the passage of the European Jewish community into a form of whiteness, however tenuous.

The period after the wars represented, in Ruffins’ view, a time of challenge and increased fervor among those fighting for racial equality in the United States (151). Legal activism and direct action were key strategies for the NAACP, as well as newer organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the



Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ruffins suggests that it was this culture of direct action, coupled with the history of military service undertaken by racial and ethnic minorities, that ultimately led to the series of legal decisions that sought to affirm the civil rights of all American citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity, and marked the beginning of a legally desegregated America (151). While legal segregation came to an end during the 1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the challenge of contending with the less visible forms of racism that pervade American society took the place of legal battles.

Ruffins concludes her piece by considering the many iterations of pluralist vocabulary that has been used to describe and imagine American society over the past decades. Listing the concepts that have emerged since the introduction of the “melting pot” ideology, Ruffins seems to suggest that more recent terms such as “salad bowl”, “mosaic” and “tapestry” offer more promise than their earlier counterpart (154). Finally turning to the concept of multiculturalism, which made its way into American public discourse in the 1990s (and coincided with the adoption of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act adopted in 1988), Ruffins remarks that “each of these efforts embodied a crucial but not total change in cultural attitudes”, adding that each change “produced a furious response from those who still clung to nativist ideas...” (154). For Ruffins, the adoption of a positive attitude towards diversity constitutes a goal in itself, writing that “Kallen’s ideas about cultural pluralism have become widely accepted among both liberal sectors and younger generations” (154). The text therefore culminates with the view that the challenge to a happy multicultural society resides in

the faction of older, and presumably less liberal-minded Americans, upholding the myth that liberal political ideology is somehow synonymous with anti-racism. Despite this conclusion, the text constitutes a deeper consideration of racism in American society that leads the reader away from the tone of the physical exhibit which emphasizes the benign concept of community. Perhaps more importantly, the article forms the only instance in which the concept of whiteness as it emerged in the United States is named and interrogated at all.

### **Strategies of Replacement and the Language of New Arrival**

The beginning of the twentieth century brought with it the need for a new form of vocabulary with which to speak about inhabitants of the United States. While continued immigration brought new residents to American cities, the internal migration of second and third generation Americans from rural communities to urban centers brought about a collision of identities as more recently arrived Americans competed for resources and opportunities. The competition for resources was in many ways a contest over entitlement, and resulted in a conceptual distinction among immigrants of European descent between those who had been present in the United States for longer, and those who had only just arrived. At this relatively early moment in the nation's history, this distinction called upon notions of indigeneity that marked the consolidation of what has been referred to as "replacement" (Morgensen 2011; Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013; Wolfe 2006). The term "replacement" indicates the process through which Indigenous inhabitants are physically and discursively disappeared from settler

societies, while settlers are instilled into the landscape through direct occupation and into the national narrative through legislation, scholarship, memorialization, and other varied forms of cultural messaging. Eve Tuck and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) define settler colonialism as a “specific formation of colonialism in which the colonizer comes to stay, making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing” (73). They further describe settler colonialism in North America as operating through a “triad of relationships, between the (white [but not always]) settlers, the Indigenous inhabitants, and chattel slaves who are removed from their homelands to work stolen land” (73). The logic of settler colonialism requires not only the physical elimination of Indigenous people from the land, but the full extinction of their legal, moral, and historical claims to their territory. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández argue that there is a crucial transformation of land into private property that lies at the core of the settler colonial project: “Land”, they write, “in being settled, becomes property” (73). In addition to this transformation of land into property, the denial of the colonial triad that positions settlers, Indigenous inhabitants and enslaved laborers within a defined set of power relations becomes an integral component of the settler state and its discourse.

An exhibit that aims to represent this period of American immigration and urban experience will come up against the complex issue of naming as it seeks to distinguish between those Americans who were second or third generation immigrants by the end of the nineteenth century, and those who arrived in the early twentieth century. The introductory text for this section of the exhibit readily points to the tensions that arose out of the wave of immigration that characterized the period from the 1900-1965,

describing new immigrants as “newcomers” who had to negotiate their places in American society alongside “native-born” Americans (Creating Community). The very distinction between “newcomers” and “native-born” Americans made in the exhibit text holds the germ of American notions of entitlement, in which the status of “native” is transposed from Indigenous Americans to second-generation immigrants to the country. The lapse in time between the arrival of those now considered “native-born” being relatively short, the text reveals the speed with which notions of authenticity in American identity were cemented, and further, how those notions were tethered to ideas of whiteness as the quintessential American characteristic. In the century following the 1790 Naturalization Act, white settlers of European descent had effectively supplanted Native Americans as the rightful inhabitants of the land, laying claim to a new status as “native” Americans.

That the exhibit text makes use of the term “native-born Americans” is significant. The lexicon of indigeneity employed in this section of the exhibit follows a pattern that is replicated across settler societies across the globe. If settler colonialism is “typified by its practiced epistemological refusal to recognize the latent relations of the settler colonial triad”, as Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández argue, one of the central mechanisms it employs to this end is the telling and retelling of its origin story - an origin story that reimagines and rewrites the concept of nativeness (74). The term “native”, that only decades prior in the historical narrative offered by the exhibit was perennially capitalized and accompanied by the qualifier American, is now transformed into a descriptor for the settlers and descendants of settlers who appropriated Indigenous

lands. Lorenzo Veracini (2011) argues that in order to secure its discursive, political and moral integrity, the settler colonial state must continually deny the historical existence and contemporary presence of Indigenous people within its borders. For the settler state, certain histories pose a grave potential disturbance. In the context of the United States, the recalcitrance of contemporary Indigenous claims to the land, the continued presence of Indigenous people and descendants of enslaved people disrupts the possibility of national stasis. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández describe this recalcitrance by arguing that Indigenous people and descendants of enslaved people “won’t do what they are supposed to do” - that is, to disappear into the past by either vanishing or assimilating (77). So long as Indigenous people and descendants of enslaved people refuse to behave as the state would want them to, the “ugly business of the founding of the settler-state can’t be surpassed, can’t be forgotten” (77). In this sense, histories that insist on conjuring the triadic nature of American colonialism function as roadblocks on the path to forgetting - a form of remembrance that forecloses the possibility of simply getting over the past.

Even as the language of the earlier sections of the exhibit attempt to acknowledge the histories of colonialism and chattel slavery, the language used in descriptions twentieth century America replicate the lexical habits that allow for second and third generation settlers to be referred to as “native-born” Americans. It is precisely this linguistic turn that allows for an unquestioned reading of the term “American”, whereby we are pulled into the scope of a new territorial order, one in which European settlers effectively become native Americans, and the land-turned-property becomes

theirs to occupy. The persistence of the narrative of disappearance is palpable, even while parallel efforts to nod subtly in the direction of colonial legacies remain present in certain places in the exhibit.

### **Futurity, Nativeness and White Crisis**

As a form of national historical curriculum, the narrative offered in the *Many Voices* exhibit holds tremendous importance not only in renditions of the past, but in formulations of the future. As Andrew Baldwin (2012) argues, “privileging the past when researching geographies of whiteness risks overlooking the ways in which whiteness and hence various forms of racism are configured in relation to a different temporal horizon: the future” (172). While the events of the past are wholly relevant to understandings of nation and identity, a restrictive focus on history as the key locus of settler-colonialism forecloses the possibility of investigating the ways in which conceptions of nation, identity, belonging and entitlement are trained on the future. In our focus on the past as the crucible of the nation, we ought to ask what possible futures such practices seek to bring about or foreclose, and, importantly, how certain futures might be resisted and reimagined through different approaches to the past and present. The “Building Community” section of the exhibit demonstrates the poignancy of language in shaping future worlds, most notably in the linguistic slippage between the use of the term “Native American” in the earlier two sections of the exhibit, and the introduction of the term “native-born American” in this section. The move from a capitalized “Native” to a lower-case native, together with the change in signification from

Indigenous to settler, and from colonist to rightful inhabitant of the land, functions to protect the future of whiteness as expressed in the exhibit, and marks the delineation between a period of colonial ambiguity and one of national certainty.

In what ways, then, is the implied futurity of historical national narratives of importance to museums? What role might museums play in reimagining the future of settler-states by representing different pasts and presents? One point of departure could be to examine how the phenomenon of white crisis has manifested in relation to debates about museums. Where the Smithsonian is concerned, these tensions have been exacerbated by the national character of the museums, as well as their role in developing and dispensing a national narrative. As with so many national museums, the national narratives developed and curated by the Smithsonian are also curricular in nature, in that they play a foundational role in the education of millions of school children and adult tourists who travel to the nation's capital to visit the institution's museums. In addition to this, the very placement of the museums themselves within the heart of the nation's capital, on the precious swath of land in the monumental core of the city, makes each museum's presence intimately entangled in questions of spatial scarcity, monumental crowding, and fears of white displacement. The National Museum of American History, and the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit thus operates as a nexus for the tensions around national identity, historiography and whiteness. Baldwin suggests that white supremacy is "reproduced through shared practices of futurity", practices that allow for or invite the imaginative, speculative work of projecting whiteness into future places and spaces (175). The construction of national narratives

such as the one displayed through the *Many Voices* exhibit compels us to read the rendition of the past as a response to anxieties about the future. While the exhibit is designed to provide a narrative of the American past, it must also do the work of attending to concerns about the American future.

The second text in this section of the anthology explores the relationship between education, language instruction, and the Americanization project, and attends to the questions of white anxiety and its attachment to the future. In “Education and Americanization: The Language of Community”, Joan Fragaszy Troyano, a researcher at the NMAH, and Debbie Schaefer-Jacobs, an NMAH curator, follow the development of the public school system in the United States in order to explore the connective role that it played in promoting a homogenous idea of American identity, largely transmitted through the medium of English language education. A poster produced by the Americanization Committee of the Cleveland Board of Education in 1917 serves as a visual starting point for their exploration of the interwovenness of American English and the Anglo-Protestant values that were situated as being distinctly American in nature. Written in six different languages spoken within the Cleveland area, the poster invites the parents of students enrolled in public schools to attend free evening and weekend classes. In contrast to public schools, the authors point out that parochial schools typically had more flexibility to offer instruction in languages other than English, as well as to develop their own curriculum (166). The article looks at the “material culture of the classroom” in order to better understand student experiences as both public and parochial schools “attempted to develop shared communities amid linguistic and cultural



diversity” (166). Although there were no formal national requirements governing public school curricula in the nineteenth century, the widespread use of specific textbooks created a *de facto* standardization of English instruction, which included Protestant prayers and morality tales in addition to material aimed at teaching basic literacy and grammar skills. The very ideas of American identity and Anglo-Protestant values were therefore inextricably linked in the configuration of American public schools.

American Indian boarding schools, introduced in the 1870s, form perhaps the most extreme example of the mobilization of public education in the service of assimilation. David Wallace Adams (1955) has described the boarding school period as the “last Indian War”, in which Indigenous children became the key targets of the American state which saw residential schools as a method of “saving Indians by destroying them” (xi). Mirroring the Canadian and Australian residential school systems, American Indian boarding schools emerged as a promising solution to what American politicians called the “Indian problem”, and presented an alternative to military intervention purporting to eliminate resistance from the inside out (7). Troyano and Schaefer-Jacobs touch only briefly on the history of American Indian residential schools, naming the use of “military-like schedules and disciplinary methods” as a means of forcing assimilation, but giving the topic only a short paragraph of treatment in their text (167). Importantly, the residential school system is not linked in their text to the related efforts at Westward expansion and appropriation of Indigenous land, failing to describe the residential schools as a form of weaponized education.

The national Centennial celebrations of 1876 are positioned as having shaped the development of a range of patriotic classroom practices, including the use of classroom materials bearing the American flag, to the reciting of patriotic songs and pledges. The now-common practice of flying an American flag in front of public educational institutions was popularized by the magazine *Youth's Companion*, which encouraged student-led sales of flags in order to “put a flag over every school house” (167). In 1892, the same magazine promoted the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance by students in school - another practice that has become a daily habit in classrooms across the United States. Coupled with increasing anxiety over the influx of immigrants, the patriotic fervor of the Centennial celebrations lay the groundwork for the retooling of public education in order to assimilate newcomers to America, in order to “foster a shared American culture among the student population” (167). A photograph of a small savings bank in the shape of a one-room schoolhouse serves as an example of the ideals of Americanization efforts at the turn of the twentieth century. The savings bank, distributed by the Jos D. Lowe Company of Boston for use by children, articulates the concerns of the Americanization movement in clear terms: “On These We Insist”, declares the text on the side of the bank, “One Nation, Flag, Language, School” (169). Distributed during a period of rapid urbanization, the depiction of the American public school as a country schoolhouse is no doubt intended to evoke nostalgia for an imagined homogenous American past. The authors situate the savings bank amid the debates about bilingual education that had emerged during this period, with several legal challenges to the right of tax-supported schools to provide instruction in a

language other than English having been made at the local, state and even national level (169). Despite these challenges, bilingual education was present in schools across the nation, even as ideas about the importance of English-only instruction were espoused at the highest levels of government, as showcased in President Theodore Roosevelt's infamous statement that "We have room but for one language here and that is the English language" (170). An image of a child's report card from Academie Saint Jean-Baptiste, a French-language school located in Pawtucket, Rhode Island shows evidence of the ways in which schools navigated the necessity of assimilation and the desire to retain instruction in a language other than English. Although the bulk of the report card is written in French, the categories "reading", "spelling" and "language" sit alongside the separate categories of "*lecture*", "*orthographe*" and "*langue française*" (171). Troyano and Schaefer-Jacobs point out that the language question in schools continues to spark intense debate, noting that "the multiplicity of approaches to contemporary schooling and continuous immigration from around the globe means that the issue of language use in schools remains as contentious as ever" (174).



[Fig. 24: Americanization pledge printed on the side of a wooden savings bank distributed by the Jos. D. Lowe Company c. 1900, NMAH.]

Where the physical exhibit forecloses the ambiguity of the future by asserting new understandings of nativeness, the anthology offers opportunities to read the histories of urbanization, education, immigration, internal migration, housing and civil rights through the perspective of the potential futures these histories might shape. Yet the anthology, though connected to the physical exhibit thematically and developed through connected institutional processes, does not form an integral part of the exhibit curriculum, and remains relegated to the sphere of scholarship, detached from the experience of the physical exhibit that forms the primary site of contact between the museum and its constituencies.

## Chapter Seven

### White Hospitality: Representing Migration in Contemporary America

The final section of the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit covers the period from 1965-2000, coming the closest to representing present-day conflicts over identity and belonging in the United States. Under the title “New Americans, Continuing Debates”, the section explores the themes of immigration and assimilation as they collide with contemporary understandings of American identity and citizenship. The introductory text for this section references the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, explaining that the United States experienced a resurgence in immigration after the legislation was implemented. The Hart-Celler Act reformed decades of restrictive immigration policy that relied on nation-based quotas to limit the number of immigrants from certain countries whose migrants were deemed less desirable. The 1965 Act replaced the 1924 Immigration Act under which 84% of visas were allocated to immigrants from northern and western Europe, a percentage arrived at based on figures from the 1890 national census. The 1924 Act had sought to allocate visas to the equivalent of 2% of the total number of people from each nation as per the 1890 census figures, effectively using historic demographic data in order to produce, reproduce, and ensure a white racial majority in the United States (Zhou 2001). The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act marked a departure from immigration policy based on national quotas, and instead implemented an immigration system whose quotas relied on family relationships, forming the foundation of American immigration policy that is still in effect today.

The title of this section of the exhibit takes up the trope of newness in order to reference the recent arrival of “new Americans”. Using the conceptual framework of “native” versus “new” inhabitants set up in the earlier portions of the exhibit, this section relies on the uncertainty of the American migratory future in order to tell stories of contest, assimilation, and resistance between a “native” American citizenry and “new” arrivals who permeate the nation’s borders. The concurrent use of the term “debates” in the section’s title creates a lexical association between recently-arrived immigrants and national conflict, a move that points to anxieties about the capacity of the nation to absorb and adapt to “diverse” inhabitants. The fact that the debates are “continuing”, as the section’s title suggests, denotes an uncertainty about the future that mirrors anxieties about the changing demographic nature of the United States.

The “New Americans” section contains many stories of cultural retention: instances where traditions, practices, and artforms have successfully resisted the homogenizing influence of melting pot ideology. In this sense, the section projects a celebratory narrative that is reminiscent of the happy heterogeneity of the photographic montage that forms the introductory panel to the exhibit’s entrance (see fig. 8). In other instances, the section explores the ambivalence of American narratives of cross-border migration. In a display that attends to the migration of undocumented individuals over the U.S. border with Mexico, the exhibit juxtaposes the inhospitability of the Sonoran desert in Arizona with the forbidding spectre of a rusting piece of border fence. Through the display of narratives of failed migratory attempts, the exhibit also represents the tragedy of interrupted migration, bringing the questions of national hospitality and

reception to the fore through references to those whose journeys result in detention, abuse and death. By virtue of the section's titular categorizations of "new" versus native Americans, we are oriented towards the story of a static nation of American citizens whose generosity towards some and not others shapes the life trajectories of those who seek entry into the national body. Granting entry therefore becomes a right that the nation is empowered to bestow upon those who travel to its borders. The permissiveness of early American immigration is thus put into sharp contrast with the depiction of contemporary immigration experiences that cling to the concept of exclusivity.

### **Post-racialism and Whiteness in America**

The idea of color-blindness has pervaded liberal American discourses of social difference since the Civil Rights era, ushered in a series of legislative changes that transformed the political and legal landscape. With the election of Barack Obama as 44th President of the United States, descriptions of the U.S. as a post-racial society, one in which the injustices of chattel slavery and settler-colonialism had been overcome, gained traction. Belief in the idea that the 1964 Civil Rights Act effectively extinguished the racial discrimination that persisted under Jim Crow Era seemed more widespread, even as many scholars of race in America rejected this analysis (Love and Tosolt 2010). Indeed, critical race scholarship has had the task of working to make visible the systemic racism embedded within America's institutions, pushing against the tendency to disavow the existence of discriminatory practices altogether. In his 2015 text on what he calls "new racism", Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that whiteness in the

American context functions like a kind of uniform, a set of experiences, and opportunities for engagement with the world that allow some members of society to “receive systemic privileges by virtue of wearing the white - or virtually white - outfit, whereas those regarded as nonwhite are denied those benefits” (271). Bonilla-Silva’s contention is that whiteness therefore functions as the “visible uniform of the dominant racial group” (271). Analyses of whiteness as a form of embodied racial power can disrupt the colour-blind logic that seeks to explain racial inequality in individualistic and meritocratic terms, and that challenges the idea that contemporary manifestations of racial discrimination are anachronistic in American society. As a perspective on the technology of race, post-racialism points to individual progress, legislative protections, and popular representations as evidence of the obsolescence of race, often relegating instances of racism to an imagined past.

The first essay in this section of the anthology, “New Americans, Continuing Debates, 1965-2014” takes the period of legislative reform between 1965 and 1972 as its point of departure. Written by NMAH curator Margaret Salazar-Porzio, the essay considers how the promise of multiculturalism was leveraged in legislative reforms and public discourse on immigration. Spurred by the movements for civil rights and equality that characterized American political resistance during that time, the seven year period from 1965 to 1972 saw more “progressive” legislation passed than in any other period in American history after the New Deal of the 1930s. Salazar-Porzio argues that while many of the visual and material artifacts from this period seem to suggest that “the boundaries of race might be transcended” through multiculturalism, they also allow for a



deeper look into the values, fears and hopes that motivated these shifts in American immigration discourse (206). Following President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, legislative reform moved at an unprecedented pace, reshaping federal policies on education, health care, transportation and environmental protection. It was in this context of rapid and expansive legislative change that the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was passed, bringing the discourse of multiculturalism and modernity to the forefront of immigration discourse in America.

Salazar-Porzio writes about the emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of multiculturalism as a framework through which to describe and understand social difference. While the 1990 Canadian Multiculturalism Act enshrined the concept into the legislative landscape of Canada, the effects of the concept in the United States remained conceptual in nature. Salazar-Porzio argues that the idea of multiculturalism suggested that the definition of American identity itself could be modified, rather than leaving the burden of change (or assimilation) to "be shouldered only by ethnic "others"" (211). Although multiculturalism offered a lens through which to rethink the assimilationist paradigm that governed American approaches to immigration, Salazar-Porzio concludes that it was a "power-evasive, celebratory framework" that did not successfully engage with the divisions in American society concerning national identity and the role of race. Ultimately, as the exhibit progresses past its introductory section, the ideas of conflict and negotiation quickly overtake the imagined happy heterogeneity promised by multiculturalism. Here, the physical exhibit and the anthology appear at odds: the exhibit tends towards stories of negotiation and assimilation that

offer happier endings, while the articles in the anthology push against the imagined easiness of the multicultural, post-racial, nation.

Even as it showcases objects that lend themselves to a critique of a post-racial approach to immigration, the “New Americans, New Debates” section of *Many Voices* reinforces the idea that ongoing “debates” around cultural and racial assimilation lie at the core of the struggles concerning American identity. A collection of magazine covers from the late 1960s through to the 1990s forms a mosaic next to the introductory panel for this section of the exhibit, and underscores the degree to which the “changing face” of American society was at the root of anxieties around the dilution of an imagined white demographic. This dilution was visually represented in a 1993 *Time* Magazine cover, showing the face of a woman with the title “The New Face of America”. The accompanying caption reads “Take a good look at this woman. She was created by a computer from a mix of several races.” As Salazar-Porzio points out, at the time of the publication of this “multiracial cover girl”, the idea of multiculturalism was already circulating vigorously in American popular discourse. As a concept, Salazar-Porzio suggests that multiculturalism was acceptable because it allowed the positive elements of immigration and globalization to be emphasized, while obscuring the realities of inequality, discrimination and conflict. This rendition of a mythological multicultural woman, meant to embody the effects of immigration trends in America, was intended to personify a “nonthreatening future *Time* thought its readers would accept” (215). Through the whitening of her physical characteristics, and the concealing of her hair’s texture, the woman’s appearance ignores the histories of anti-miscegenation laws,

racial hierarchies, and white beauty norms in America. Further, her computer-generated nature places the multiracial cover girl outside of the realm of the “natural”: she is not a representation of a naturally-occurring combination of physical characteristics, but rather a machine-generated cyborg, so unimaginable that creating her likeness required the use of imaging technologies.

While the 1965 Nationality Act marked the arrival of a new language for describing and imagining diversity within the national body, it also produced dramatic effects on both documented and undocumented migratory patterns. Even as the 1965 Nationality Act abolished national origins quotas for immigration to the United States, it put in place a system of numerical restrictions on the entire world. Informed by the civil rights-oriented logic of legal equality, this form of restriction was seen as less individually discriminatory than the previous quota-based system. According to Gabriel Jackson Chin (2008), the 1965 Act must be understood as deriving from the civil rights movement, as it sought to reform an immigration system that had actively privileged white immigration to the United States since the 1790 act was put in place. Chin argues that “Congress actually intended to eliminate racial discrimination” by abolishing the national origins formula that had been a central feature of immigration policy since the nation’s inception (273). Chin suggests that these reforms speak to a shift in the racial discourse of American identity, in which Congress “rejected the idea of America as a white nation” (273). If the rejection of the idea of America as a white nation was part of the impetus for the 1965 immigration reforms, it also signaled the arrival of a renewed anxiety around American whiteness. Critics of American immigration legislation have

described the act as having paved the way for the United States to become a “majority minority” country, a concept that relies on a mythologized population of native white Americans, at the same time as it identifies the racialized unease that characterizes white fear of a future of color.

What is the relationship between the shift in immigration policy exemplified by the 1965 Act, and the changing discursive landscape of racial difference in the United States? The Hart-Celler Act no doubt marked an important discursive shift in the language of immigration in America, which from its very development in 1790 had made explicit use of the racial category of “white”, followed eventually by the category “black”. Yet as Douglas, Saenz and Murga (2015) argue, while the explicit use of racial categories was removed from American immigration legislation in 1965, the racialized implications of immigration legislation continued to shape public discourse on immigration, as well as immigration trends themselves. They point out that while the “racial language that once characterized immigration issues has largely disappeared”, the influence of racialized thinking continues to play a central role in American immigration policy and discourse (1430). Where American immigration policy had hitherto been unabashed in its white supremacist convictions, confirming these through its reliance on imagined racial categories, the logic of white supremacy had to find new avenues and mechanisms in which to exert influence, making the task of unearthing racism in a self-proclaimed “colour-blind” society all the more challenging. Douglas, Saenz and Murga contend that white supremacist thinking continues to operate as the foundational logic of immigration policy in America, and further that belief in

“colour-blindness” effectively allows racial inequality to be explained “through the use of nonracial factors” (1431). Crucially, persistent belief in colour-blindness and post-raciality makes possible the absolution of immigration policy from involvement in systemic racial discrimination.

As a concept, color-blindness and the melting pot idea of assimilation share many features. A melting pot eliminates the salience of difference by dissolving it away, while color-blindness insists that difference isn’t present in the first place. In each case, the result is that social difference, and the correlating inequality that results from it, are imagined away, leaving behind only the liberal explanations of variance in individual skill, determination and perseverance as explanations for persistent social inequities. As argued in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the rhetorical power of the melting pot remains poignant, and is often literalized through assimilationist policies that aim to homogenize.

### **Conflict and Hybridity**

Through the depiction of a series of struggles between “new” Americans and their host society, the exhibit contends with the idea of conflict around belonging and entitlement in America. In doing so, both the exhibit avoids serious engagement with the persistent racial hierarchies that shape ideas of entitlement, and instead favor stories of compromise and negotiation. In a section entitled “From Polar Opposites to a Third Space”, Margaret Salazar-Porzio takes up the framework of hybridity as a counterpoint to the imagery of the melting pot. While she employs the concept as it is often understood in anthropology, the use of hybridity in cultural studies lends itself to a

critical analysis of the power relations that undergird cultural exchange, adaptation, and negotiation. Salazar-Porzio defines hybridity as the “sociocultural transformation in which different groups generate new fusions out of existing cultural traditions” (216). This understanding, she maintains, stands in contrast to the idea of unidirectional absorption into a singular “American mainstream culture”, and thus differs from the melting pot approach by attending to the multiplicity of cultural influences at play (216). While Salazar-Porzio’s use of hybridity does offer a “way out of binary thinking”, the physical exhibit is left without its critical potential having been explored through the use of the concept.

In the foreword to the 2015 edition of the collection *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that hybridity offers the possibility of discerning and theorizing the limits of pluralist ‘progress’ (ix). Quoting Etienne Balibar (1994), Bhabha argues that the “failures of minoritarian rights and protections are ‘repressed contradictions that haunt modern politics: in this sense, even though they are constantly presented as exterior to it, they are constantly present in the hollow of its discursive, legislative, organizational and repressive practices’” (ix). In navigating the final section of the *Many Voices* exhibit, the unexplored “hollows” in which lurk the contradictions that Bhabha names are everywhere embedded in the display cases, disrupting the celebratory narrative that the exhibit invites us to adopt.

Two instances of hybridity captured in the “New Americans” section of the exhibit stand out as particularly striking examples of these lurking contradictions. The first

example, presented under the rubric of “Marching with Liberty”, describes a 230 mile march that took place in 2000 in Florida. The event, called the March for Dignity, Dialogue, and a Fair Wage, was organized to protest the poor working conditions and meager wages earned by migrant farm workers without whose labor the fresh produce industry in the United States could not function. The display case contains a large, paper-mache replica of Lady Liberty, created by artist Kim Ridriguez for use during the demonstration. Donated to the NMAH by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the statue originally stood on a pedestal that bore the words of poet Langston Hughes: “I too, am America”. In her left hand, the statue carries a basket of tomatoes, and she raises another tomato in her right hand, in lieu of a torch. Finally, instead of the green patina of the Lady Liberty statue, the replica’s arms, face and hair are brown, a statement about the racial diversity of the mostly Mexican, Haitian, Mayan and Guatemalan people who make up the migrant agricultural workforce in Florida. In her article, Salazar-Porzio argues that in combining a national symbol with the physical characteristics of a migrant agricultural worker, the sculpture “allows for grassroots action as it confronts power relations” (217). While the poignancy of the statue, together with the description and photograph of the demonstration that accompany it in the display case, undeniably speak to the potential of agency in grassroots organizing, the celebratory tone of the exhibit and the correlating anthology article suggest that the statue itself bears the evidence of the fruits of cultural hybridity. Salazar-Porzio concludes that the demonstration “displayed new strength and momentum for organized labor”, with no attention to the persistent absence of protections for migrant workers in

the United States (218). The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be a deadly and devastating month for the agricultural workers of Florida, many of whom are moving north in search of work as the coronavirus pandemic brings farmwork to a standstill. Without the ability to take sick leave, or to access adequate healthcare, the statue is a reminder that the importation of labor continues to be a mainstay of the American economy.



[Fig. 25: Sculpture of the Statue of Liberty by artist and activist Kat Rodriguez in 2000, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2019]

The second example of hybridity is offered via the stories of two children's soccer teams, both established in states located in the American south that receive large numbers of immigrants. The first team is the Fugees soccer team, which was established in the town of Clarkston, Georgia in 2004. The second is the Los Jets team, founded in Siler City, North Carolina. The second article in this section of the anthology, written by curator L. Stephen Velasquez, offers an account of his quest to gather



artifacts that could represent the stories of these soccer teams, and begins with his first-person narrative of his trip to Clarkston. In searching for objects that could help to tell the story of these two teams, Velasquez asserts that sports fields have “long been arenas where tensions about rapidly changing cultural and racial differences and American identities have been defined and contested” (231). The examples of the soccer teams are in both cases cast as instances of negotiation and debate - processes of adaptation in which suburban southern towns have been “transformed as global migrations have profoundly changed the long-standing racial and cultural politics of the South” (231). In Velasquez’ opening account, migration and migrants are once again imagined as agents of change in an otherwise stable and linear national evolutionary story. Ultimately, Velasquez celebrates the transformative effects prompted by the arrival of the immigrant communities in southern US towns, writing that the “persistence of the coaches and the enthusiasm and talent of the players helped cultivate a rich and diverse network of local support” (232). The effect of this opening narrative is to present an idea of southern “racial and cultural politics” as static and ahistorical, overlooking the intensive upheaval of the uprisings of the Civil War and Civil Rights movement, to name but two punctuating events in the relatively recent history of the American South.

The rhetorical significance of soccer as a symbol of foreignness and difference in the United States has perhaps very recently begun to shift as the sport increases in popularity in America. In their article “Globalization, Culture Wars, and Attitudes Towards Soccer in America”, Andrew Lindner and Daniel Hawkins describe the relationship between nationalist attitudes in the United States and disdain for soccer.

Often characterized as “the world’s sport”, Lindner and Hawkins offer a collection of examples of anti-soccer rhetoric, typically articulated by self-styled patriotic public figures, quoting sports commentator Jim Rome as stating that “soccer is not a sport”, and that he would sooner give his son “ice skates and a shimmering sequined blouse” before handing him a soccer ball (69). While Lindner and Hawkins set out to measure the correlation between sentiments towards globalization and sentiments about soccer, they set up the tension up in terms of the “culture war” theory that suggests that the centrally defining bifurcation that exists in American culture is that between “progressivism” and “orthodoxy” - borrowing the terms employed by James Davidson Hunter in his 1991 book *Culture Wars*. While the chasm between the two ideological hubs of progressivism and orthodoxy no doubt play a role in shaping discourses of divisiveness in the United States, the element of race, or perhaps racialization more accurately, is largely absent from their analysis, in much the same way as it remains unnamed in the narrative offered by the final section of the *Many Voices* exhibit.

The Fugees (short for ‘refugees’) was made up of children who had arrived in the United States, escaping conflict in their home countries. Designated as a refugee relocation site in the 1980s because of its proximity to the city of Atlanta and its relatively low cost of living, Clarkston receives a large portion of the refugees received by the state of Georgia. Established by Luma Mufleh, herself a Jordanian immigrant, the Fugees soccer team became the center of a conflict that developed concerning the use of various fields in the community, a conflict that was emblematic of the existing tensions between inhabitants of Clarkston and the communities of refugees who settled

there. As xenophobic sentiments coalesced around access to sporting fields in the Clarkston area, arguments were made that the recreational spaces were only intended to be used for football and baseball, and that the playing of soccer was not permitted. Over the course of several years, Mufleh's efforts to negotiate access to the fields ultimately resulted in winning the team access to spaces to practice and play soccer.



[Fig. 26: Fugees team jersey circa 2012, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2019]

The display case contains a few objects used by former members of the Fugees soccer team: a team jersey, a well-worn pair of soccer cleats, and a soccer ball. In his anthology article, L. Stephen Velasquez chronicles the experience of collecting the items, and shares the story of a young player known as “One Shoe”. Velasquez recounts that as an eight-year-old, “One Shoe” had arrived at his first Fugees practice session with a single cleat for his right foot. While Velasquez writes that he was unable to find “One Shoe” himself, he uses this story as a way of explaining the presence of the pair of cleats in the exhibit - a pair that had been worn by several players over the

years, in keeping with the team's practice of handing down equipment to younger players. For Velasquez, the cleats are symbolic of the resilience and struggles of the immigrant communities that settle in the American South, suggesting that the cleats "help illustrate the struggles of migrant kids, and the determination and resourcefulness of the refugee community" (235). A photograph of the team leaning on their team bus used for transportation to local games shows a group of children of different ages and genders, smiling proudly in their team uniforms, with coach Luma Mufleh in the center. The story of the Fugees soccer team culminates in this representation of hard-won happiness, focusing not on the racism and intolerance that obstructed their efforts, but on the satisfaction and delight of the team members and their coach.

The story of the Los Jets soccer team established in Siler City, North Carolina follows a similar trajectory. Named after the local high school football team, The Jets, the soccer team was started by Paul Cuadros, a second-generation Peruvian immigrant who sought to "help a group of kids struggling to fit in" (236). As a town in which football played a central role in public life, the suggestion that a high school soccer team be established was initially met with denial that enough interest existed among students to form a team, despite evidence that strong interest in the sport existed among the school's Latino students, who accounted for half of the total student population. The push to establish a soccer team occurred against the backdrop of a series of racist, anti-immigration displays in the town, including a Ku Klux Klan rally that was organized by the local chapter of the white supremacist group National Alliance. Once the soccer team was formed, Velasquez describes the harassment to which players were often

subjected while on the field. Despite the challenges faced by the coach and players of Los Jets, Velasquez' account is one of reconciliation: acceptance of the sport (and by extension, we are invited to assume, of the children playing it), increased once the team began to compete successfully against high school teams from neighboring towns. He concludes by stating that the sports field "became the epicenter of where the towns of Clarkson and Siler City grappled with changing demographics and community acceptance", adding that the struggles faced by immigrants in Clarkston and Siler City "represent some of the continuing challenges of living in a globalized and increasingly diverse United States" (238). Devoid of any mention of the pervasive systemic racism that formed the context for the hateful reception faced by these young soccer players, the exhibit narrative tows the line of the multicultural trope that Salazar-Porzio sets out to complicate in her earlier chapter in the anthology. National diversity as celebratory resilience becomes the logical conclusion that the exhibit invites us to draw.

Although the interpretive text of the exhibit puts forward an understanding of hybridity that frames it as a set of generally positive outcomes resulting from cultural proximity, the examples themselves highlight the power-laden tensions that lie at the root of negotiations concerning space, identity and entitlement. As Bhabha argues, since its appearance, the concept of hybridity has been absorbed into neoliberal discourses of cultural difference. He writes that in our current moment, hybridity has become "a ubiquitous form of cultural universalism, the proper name of a homogenizing pluralism" (ix). Towards the end of her article, Salazar-Porzio turns to the limitations of exhibitional praxis, calling into question the capacity of object labels in museum exhibits

to allow museum-goers to engage with the multiplicity of meanings embedded in each object: “As a curator, the challenge is to present these objects in a way that invites visitors to read the political implications of human experiences beyond celebrations of simplistic notions of multiculturalism - and in less than 100 words for each museum label” (219). While her contribution to the exhibit anthology reveals a desire to complicate the largely celebratory representations of hybridity offered in the exhibit, the display and interpretations of the objects in the physical exhibit space coalesce around the idea of hybridity as happy mixity. Even where there was injustice present, the narrative of the exhibit compels us to understand the tension as transitional - an uncomfortable stop on the way to a hybridity that becomes the “celebratory sign of diversity” (Bhabha ix). Ultimately, both recountings offer us happy endings, in which white inhospitality is overcome without it ever having been named.

### **Documentation as Weapon, Policing as Nation-building**

As the *New Americans* section of the exhibit progresses, the stories of the soccer teams in the American South give way to a display that represents cross-border migration between Mexico and the United States. The display begins by situating the viewer in the geographic terrain in which this migration takes place. Perhaps the most striking object in the display case is a segment of a border fence that separated Calexico, California from Mexicali, Mexico. It is an imposing, severe structure, standing at over eleven feet in height. It is weathered and rusted, and causes the display case to stand out from the others by virtue of its aesthetic harshness. In addition to barbed wire at the top, the fence includes long strips of metal, installed horizontally across the lower

portion. The strips, called tarmac plates, were likely added to the fence after attempts to cut through or dig under it.<sup>9</sup> The object description informs us that this version of the fence was replaced by a more “substantial” one in 1997. Forming the background of the entire display case is a photograph of the Sonoran desert, a desert which extends across the southern border of the state of Arizona and into the northern border of Mexico. Although beautiful as portrayed in the photograph, the absence of shade and clouds, the expansiveness of the hills, golden with dried vegetation, and the ruggedness of the mountains in the background all suggest a form of enforcement architecture of a different kind. The desert landscape forms the literal and figurative background for this section of the exhibit. In front of the segment of the border fence, two sets of clothing are displayed. Mounted on wire forms, the two sets of clothing stand in sharp contrast to one another: on the left stands the uniform of a border patrol officer, and on the right stands an outfit fashioned out of clothing found in the Sonoran desert, likely worn at one time by a person attempting to traverse it. The visual repetition of the two sets of clothing emphasizes the embodied effects produced by border policing, and foregrounds the arbitrary nature of the distinctions that entitle certain bodies to intercept the passage of others.

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<sup>9</sup> In his 2018 photographic essay, photographer John Moore provided an overview of the various barriers, both natural and built, that exist along the border. He indicates that the “tarmac plates” referred to in the exhibit are in fact material left over from the Vietnam War, which had originally been intended for use in building helicopter landing pads.



[Fig. 27: Segment of barrier from the Mexico-U.S. border replaced in 1998, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2020]

In an article called “The Desert Colossus: Fragments of Twenty-First-Century Undocumented Migration”, anthropologist Jason De León contextualizes the objects in the display pertaining to migration across the U.S.-Mexican border. Author of the 2015 book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Sonoran Desert Migrant Trail*, De León’s research has focused on the human consequences of policing along the U.S.-Mexico border, with specific attention to the harnessing of the harsh desert geography in service of border protection. Several of the objects included in this section of the exhibit were found during his field work in the Sonoran Desert and were donated



by him to the NMAH. He begins his anthology article by describing the mythology surrounding the definition of the U.S. border with Mexico, suggesting that “Much of the American public imagines the U.S.-Mexico border to be a well-defended line in the sand”, consisting of an “impassable wall” that “boldly divides two countries” (257). In fact, as De León points out, only approximately 18 percent of the 1,954 mile border between the two countries has anything resembling a fence or wall. While the reinforcement of barriers such as the displayed portion of the fence were part of a strategy of “Prevention Through Deterrence” adopted by the American government in the 1990s, the vast majority of the U.S.-Mexico border remains free of built barriers, instead rendering migration tremendously risky by virtue of the treacherous natural climate of the Sonoran desert.

De León describes how the desert landscape forms an integral component of the American government’s approach to border patrol, providing the government with a substantial “tactical advantage” (258). The logic of the “Prevention Through Deterrence” approach rests on the assumption that reinforcing more heavily populated areas along the border with strengthened built barriers would push those seeking to enter the United States to attempt to travel by foot across the unpopulated desert landscape, making their safe passage less likely, and allowing for border patrol officers to more easily apprehend them. The absence of built barriers along the majority of the U.S.-Mexico border stands in stark contrast to the understandings of border protection practices that circulate in American public discourse. The 2016 presidential election in the United States showcased this tension most prominently in Donald Trump’s promise to build a

wall along the United States-Mexico border. While Trump's campaign strategies leveraged this conflict for political gain, the turmoil surrounding documentation and migration in the United States is not new, nor is the strategy of wall and barricade-building unique to the current presidential administration. Although the idea of building a wall between the United States and Mexico has been presented as recent, De León points out that "what most people don't know is that this type of obstacle literally disappears as soon as you get to the edge of any American border town" (258). To be sure, the rugged landscape that shapes the border is extremely dangerous in certain areas: the Sonoran desert experiences extreme temperatures, a scarcity of freshwater, and, as De León writes, "more species of rattlesnakes than any other place on earth" (258). Despite this, research on migration patterns between the United States and Mexico indicates that people seeking to enter the United States have not been dissuaded by the "Prevention Through Deterrence" strategy. Rather, asserts De León, this approach has only rendered the process of undocumented migration "more difficult and deadly" (258). The collection of found objects in the display case of the physical exhibit highlights the disregard for the humanity of the migrants to whom the objects belonged.

Returning to the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty, De León cites Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus", using it as a point of entry into an account of the discrimination experienced by immigrants who arrived in the United States via Ellis Island. The poem, argues De León, "fails to capture the cruel reality that the immigrant experience has never been easy" (260). Quoting the reflections of a physician who

worked on Ellis Island conducting physical examinations on newly-arrived immigrants, De León argues that the sentiments of disdain and intolerance that were once pervasive towards Eastern and Southern European immigrants have given way to a “sanitized” perspective, in which those who arrived on the shores of New York a century ago are “now described as noble and industrious immigrants wholly different from those who come across America's southern border today seeking a living wage and a better life” (261). The painful discrepancy between the narratives surrounding older versus more recent migrants to the United States led De León to establish the Undocument Migration Project (UMP) in 2009. The UMP conducts longitudinal anthropological research on undocumented migration from Latin America to the United States, and makes use of archeological field methods to collect and document items left behind by those who have made or attempted this dangerous journey.

The display of the two sets of clothing, presented side by side, uses the power of juxtaposition to force the question of connectedness between the objects, despite their disparate appearance. Next to the border patrol officer uniform is a basketball jersey with the word “Orlando” written across the chest, along with a University of Notre Dame baseball cap and a pair of running shoes. On the right, the mannequin is clothed with a cotton t-shirt, shorts and a baseball cap. Below the clothing on the right, a grouping of objects is gathered: a stick of anti-perspirant, some toothpaste, a comb, an empty picture frame that reads “#1 Dad”. In the first instance, the display renders visible the terms of rightful belonging: the uniform is understood as having clothed a body that belongs, whereas the found clothing represents the body that does not belong; a foreign

body. The belonging of the uniformed body is heightened by the semiotic power of the forces that it represents: this is a body that patrols the nation's borders, it is quite literally the nation's body. The uniform's legitimacy is given further weight with the presence of a name badge on the right hand pocket of the shirt. The uniform, we are told in the display text, was a gift of Richard J. Fortunato, the officer to whom the uniform belonged. As we take in the uniform, we see that the name on the badge matches the name of the uniform's donor: R.J. Fortunato. The name of the donor and the name on the badge can be cross-referenced; we know who wore the clothes, the clothes themselves serve as a form of documentation. We also learn that the clothes were offered intentionally to the museum, that they were a gift. In contrast, the text that accompanies the objects and clothing on the right of the display tells us that those objects were found, and that their owner is unknown. Here, the question of provenance bears heavily on the meaning of the objects: they were never intended to be given, and we cannot know from whom they came. The objects and the clothing are themselves undocumented. With this, the logic of the cabinet of curiosities is inverted: meaning is produced not as a result of foreignization, but rather, by the commonplaceness of the clothes opposite the uniform.

In his book 1997 *Of Hospitality*, Jacques Derrida engages with the acts of reception, invitation and welcome, asking how we come to distinguish between foreigners who are welcomed, and those who are turned away. Jacques Derrida's study of the concept of hospitality hones in on the significance of names in establishing the foreigner's right to hospitality. Documentation is the primary mechanism of recognition

at the level of the state, differentiating between those who rightfully belong within the nation's borders, and those who do not. Of the foreigner, Derrida writes that "This is someone to whom you put a question and address a demand, the first demand, the minimal demand being: "What is your name?"" (27). The ability to give one's name and to substantiate one's right to be present within the borders of a given nation has formed the bedrock of so much state-sanctioned violence. In the United States, the conflict around documentation, migration, asylum and citizenship has inflamed debates about American identity since the country's very inception. Derrida differentiates between the foreigner and the "absolute other", suggesting that the defining difference between the two lies in the fact of having a name. He writes that "...the difference, one of the subtle and sometimes ungraspable differences between the foreigner and the absolute other, is that the latter cannot have a name..." (25). The found objects in the display mirror the undocumented status of the people to whom they belonged, their incongruity next to the officer's uniform with its name badge a literalization of the exclusivity of access to the nation's hospitality.

The ability to articulate one's name, and the right to name the objects within one's world, lies at the root of appeals to transform processes of documentation within museums. In her study of the classification strategies used in ethnographic museums, anthropologist Keletso Gaone Setlhabi (2012) argues that even before museum objects are described in the context of an exhibit, they are assigned a fundamental meaning through the process of documentation (154). From their initial entry into the museum collection, objects are assigned to categories and given numbers that situate them

within the museum catalog, a process which then shapes the movement objects within the museum, in addition to informing their representation when on display.

Documentation can also mark the sorting of objects along geographic and cultural lines, upholding, for example, the distinction between ethnographic objects on the one hand, and historical objects on the other. Documentation is therefore a central component of the life of a museum object, and a primary function of museums themselves.

With so much at stake in the naming of people, places and objects, documentation has become an area of intensive focus in museum studies, as calls for the reexamination of documentation practices suggest a need to move away from what Michael Ames (1992) describes as a practice of artificially contextualizing museum objects. Setlhabi suggests that the attention to documentation “urges museums to reassess their custodian role and embrace the cultural context of the objects in their care” (154). Crucially, Setlhabi argues that practices of documentation can replicate institutional habits and reinforce Eurocentric perspectives on classification.

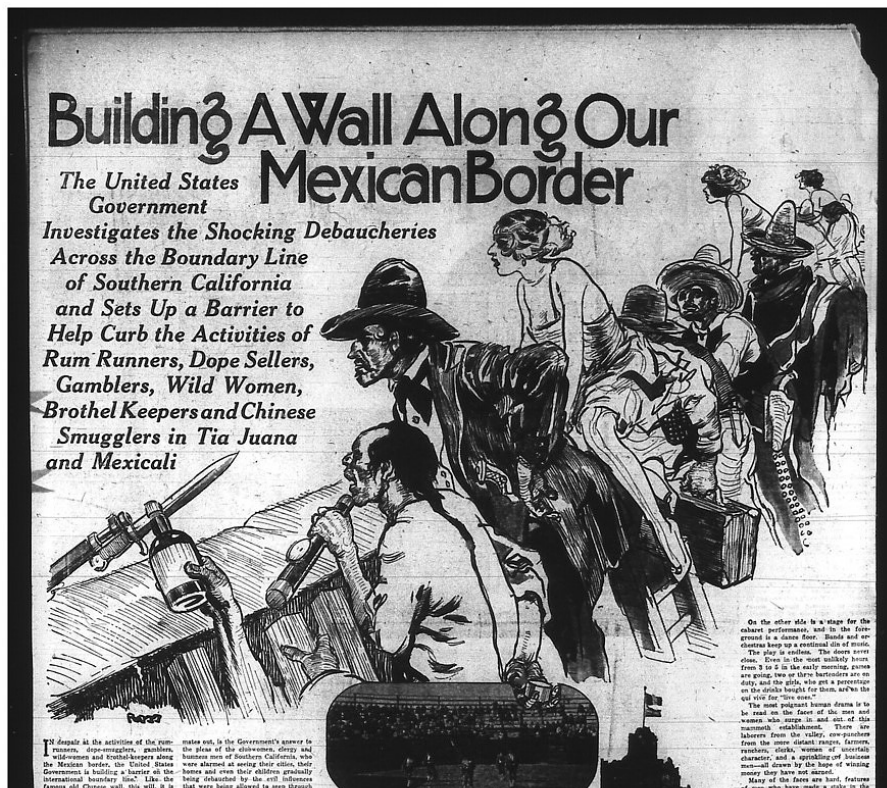
Documentation is also a process that is intertwined with that of wayfinding: a mechanism of orientation through which an individual or an object makes sense of its relationship to a larger whole. Documentation can also be a way for an object or person to find a way home, back to a place of origin, or to a new home. The 1972 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property highlights the importance of documentation in locating and repatriating objects. The Convention asks signatories to prohibit “the import of cultural property stolen from a museum or a religious or secular public

monument or similar institution in another State Party [...] provided that such property is documented as pertaining to the inventory of that institution" (art. 7b(i)). Objects that have not been properly documented in a registry or inventory are therefore liable to be difficult to locate and repatriate. There is thus a vulnerability associated with undocumentation, for the stolen cultural object as for the human migrant. To be undocumented is to be without protection, without recourse, and possibly, without a way home. De León's article concludes with a photograph of a fifteen-year-old named José Tacuri who traveled from his home in Ecuador in the hopes of reuniting with his parents in New York after having been separated from them since he was ten. The photograph's caption tells us that Tacuri has been missing since his attempted crossing in 2013.

### **Deathscapes and the Politics of Living**

An incisive moment in the exhibit comes with the inclusion of a 1924 newspaper article from California. A cartoon that accompanies the article shows a number of people, meant to be read as undesirable, looking out from behind a low wall. Under the article's title, the caption tells us that the U.S. government aims to investigate various debaucherous undertakings, and seeks to set up a barrier in order to help "curb the activities of rum runners, dope sellers, gamblers, wild women, brothel keepers and Chinese smugglers..." (*Many Voices*). The descriptive plaque tells us that the United States Border Patrol was established in 1924 in order to "enforce U.S. laws excluding Chinese laborers and preventing the spread of illicit activities south of the U.S.-Mexico line" (*Many Voices*). In a departure from the previous sections of the exhibit that

represent particular conflictual elements in American history as resolved, this section brings to the fore the longstanding nature of the conflicts surrounding the U.S. border with Mexico. With its specific reference to the building of a wall along the border, the article, together with the section of retired border fence that forms the background to the display, underline the reality that these conflicts are as present as ever.



[Fig. 28: Cartoon from a California newspaper circa 1924, *Many Voices, One Nation*, NMAH, 2020]

With the opening of *Many Voices, One Nation* having taken place in June of 2017, the inclusion of the article can be read as an engagement with the political reality in the United States surrounding cross-border migration, and functions to underscore the fact that border-related anxieties have been integral to American identity for over a century. In this sense, the exhibit is very much a product of the political and social



moment in which it was designed, and the backward-looking glance at the newspaper article introduces a time wrinkle that opens the door to an exploration of how narratives can shape future versions of themselves.

The design of the display case centered on cross-border migration brings to the fore a question that permeates all sections of the exhibit, but that is not directly addressed: how has the nationhood of the United States been pitted against human lives, and this, since the nation's inception? How were lives and bodies put to use in service of the nation - its economy, its security, its identity, and how do lives and deaths continue to be manipulated by the nation, in both ideological and visceral ways? By attending to the liminal space of the border, and in bringing together the uniform and fence, together with the found personal effects, in a single display case, the exhibit showcases the exclusive nature of human freedom as it interacts with the nation state. Troublingly, the contemporaneity of the display about migration effortlessly detaches itself from the exhibit's earlier accounts of settler colonialism, and while the display case from earlier in the exhibit about the colonisation of New Mexico might be brought into dialogue about the policing of the U.S.-Mexico border, the two sections are both physically distant and presented as thematically disparate. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues in *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (2014), the "genocidal tendency" of Euro-American colonisation is often explained away through the tropes of "cultural differences and misunderstandings" (8). In addition to obscuring the fact of genocide, these historicized interpretations of colonialism allow for its violence to be understood as belonging to the past, concealing the ways in which settler colonialism

continues to rely on violence in order to reproduce its institutions and processes. As Dunbar-Ortiz maintains, violence is not an unfortunate occasional consequence of colonialism, but rather, depends on it for success: “Settler colonialism, as an organization or institution, requires violence or the threat of violence to attain its goals” (8). Crucially, Dunbar-Ortiz insists on the threat of violence as an effective method of colonial control. The inhospitality of the Sonoran desert that forms the backdrop of the display case, together with the foreboding presence of the segment of rusted border fence topped with barbed wire, are examples of the methods through which the threat of violence is iterated by the state: explicit reminders of the absolute right of the state to determine admission into its exclusive territory, and the grounds on which such an admittance may occur. Without reference to the colonial history that laid the foundations for the brutality of the practices that it depicts, the border display represents the ongoing practice of differentiating between life deemed valuable and life deemed invaluable, highlighting the embeddedness of this process of differentiation in contemporary understandings of American identity.

In his 2003 article *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe argues that the ability to decide who can live and who must die forms the center of the type of power he describes as “sovereignty” (11). Using Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopower” as a point of entry, Mbembe engages in an exploration of the limits of sovereignty by asking a series of questions: under what conditions are the “right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of

enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer?” (12). The case of state violence complicates the “relation of enmity” to which Mbembe refers by depersonalizing the identity of the murderer. A crucial distinction here is that the deathscape of the border is characterized by the absence of a discrete murderer. Rather, the border becomes murderous through the concept of thanatopolitics, where the refusal of assistance in a climate characterized by the absence of the necessities of life itself becomes an act of exclusionary violence.

For Mbembe, power “continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy” at the same time that it works to “produce that same exception, emergency and fictionalized enemy” (16). Mbembe examines the ways in which the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. He asks “What is the relationship between politics and death in those systems that can function only in a state of emergency?” (16). The salience of the question of border control, and the urgency with which it has been infused in American discourse, reflects Mbembe’s claim about the reliance on the idea of emergency in producing the panic that serves not only to justify violence, but indeed to demand it. This section of the exhibit, although effective in demonstrating the pervasiveness of border-related fear across time, stops short of naming racism as the logic that underlies these tensions.

### **Imagining Futures of Color**

Crucially, the final section of the exhibit fails to contend with the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism, relegating the questions of emancipation, equality and civil rights to

the exhibit's earlier sections. National heterogeneity is therefore understood in this final section as relating exclusively to immigration, unaffected by pre-existing manifestations of white supremacist logic. This topical orientation toward "new" Americans has the effect of turning attention away from the tensions that exist among those who are here, relegating anti-Black racism to the civil rights period represented earlier in the exhibit. The structuring of the exhibit in this manner functions to force a disconnect between trans-Atlantic slavery and present-day struggles for racial justice. At the same time, the instances of struggle described in the section position white Americans as those whose anxieties are activated by the arrival of these "new" Americans. Black and Indigenous communities are therefore absent from the image of the nation constructed in the final section, positioned as residing outside of the national future.

The history of Black absence in American exhibitional practice is not new. In 1893, when Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, an event organized in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landfall in the New World, an account of progress and accomplishment was developed in which Black American narratives were deliberately excluded. This exclusion, vehemently challenged by many Black intellectuals and white abolitionists, resulted in the publication of a series of essays written by Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Irvine Penn and Ferdinand Barnett, under the title *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. This collection of essays survives as a record of the struggle for narrative autonomy that shaped the earliest manifestations of nationalist exhibitional practice in the United States. The buildings designed for the fair included a sector known as the

White City - a name meant to reference the bright white color of the plaster-coated buildings in that area of the exhibit, but that also symbolized the exclusionary practices that kept Black Americans from contributing actively to their own portrayal within the exhibition. The collection of essays, whose publication went largely unnoticed by the organizers of the Columbian Exposition itself, were rediscovered by historian Robert Rydell in the late 1970s and were ultimately republished in 1999 accompanied by a lengthy introduction by Rydell. Crucially, Rydell's analysis of the essays reveals that what was at stake was not only the issue of the past and its representation, but of the future staged by the exhibit:

As the racist underpinnings of the utopia projected by the fair became clear, many African Americans concluded that the World's Columbian Exposition, with its radiant White City, had become nothing less than a Frankenstein, the cultural counterpart to the lynchings that claimed 161 African-American lives in 1892 alone. If, as the sponsors of the Chicago fair proclaimed, the exposition offered a blueprint for the future course of American "civilization," then there was little doubt that this vision for the future had to be contested. (xiii)

That the future is named by Rydell as the kernel of what was at stake speaks to the consequential nature of exhibitions about the past in charting paths to possible futures. The future projected by the World's Columbian Exhibition was a white one, in which Black Americans and Indigenous people played a passive, assistive role, governed by the active and forward-looking settler nation. While the efforts of African American organizers and intellectuals to shape their representation within the exhibition were met with fierce opposition, the figure of the African American was appropriated in other exhibits. Perhaps the most well-known example of this appropriation is the Aunt Jemima

exhibit that was developed by the R.T. Davis Milling Company, in which Nancy Green, a formerly enslaved woman and servant to a Chicago judge, played the role of Aunt Jemima, flipping pancakes outside of the company's exhibition booth, and recounting stories of plantation life to fair-goers. The exhibit was one of the "hits of the fair", and resulted in a medal for the R.T. Davis Milling Company, underscoring the fact that the exhibit was "exactly the kind of role exposition directors imagined for African Americans in their dazzling White City" (xix). Borrowing Maurice Manring's terminology, Rydell concludes that the exhibit displayed a "slave in a box" - a woman whose image was entirely envisaged and controlled by the designers of the exhibit, functioning as the "perfect - indeed medal winning - emblem of a fair that made the promise of easier living for whites in America's future contingent on Black people remaining in a subordinate position in U.S. society" (xx). The patterns of white inhospitality described in Rydell's analysis map onto the Black absence in the latter sections of the *Many Voices* exhibit, showing how the terms on which hospitality is extended hinge on the utility and subordination of the Other. These patterns continue to shape not only how stories of the past are recounted and represented, but how projections of possible futures are constructed, and importantly, who is invited to share in their making.

## Conclusion

### Representing Diverse Futures

Museums are spaces that are worked on from many vantage points, and with a range of outcomes, effects. The ways in which curators collect, sort, categorize, and display objects, runs parallel to the work of historians who narrativize objects and displays, and connects to the work of conservators who engage with the material life of objects within museum collections. Alongside these fields of work, museum publics - visitors, scholars, reviewers - engage in the work of meaning-making as they interact with museum texts. These texts include the collections and the exhibits themselves, but extend into the realms of architecture, landscape design, and geographic location. The economics of museums remains a central pillar of what we might think of as museum work: lobbyists, benefactors, fundraisers, and marketing professionals, all work on the financial underpinnings of museums as tourist destinations, enterprises, tax shelters, retail destinations, and philanthropic endeavors. These disparate forms of museum work make the field of museum studies, or perhaps what one might call cultural museum studies, a varied field, in which the uneven relief of possible points of entry can make it difficult to narrow down research questions on which to focus. There are many ways to work in and on museums, and the breadth of these various modes of work lend an unruliness to the field of museum studies. This unruliness is a characteristic that I have found tremendously generative for this project, pointing me in changing disciplinary directions, and offering multiple points of entry into the work.

While elements from several of the fields listed above have shaped this project, I began this research with a set of questions about the relationship between national histories and museums. As part of the national museum complex of the United States, the Smithsonian Institution's museums participate in the shaping of national narratives of a very broad range of facets of cultural and social life in America, from sculpture to portraiture, aeronautics to zoological conservation, paleontology and contemporary American political history, to name a few of the areas of focus of the 19 museums that are part of the Institution's network. The project thus began as an interrogation of nationalism in the first instance, and then turned toward the museum as an attendant institution. In particular, I sought to investigate how national museums participate in the mediation of pasts, and how efforts to mediate history contend with the forces of colonialism and enslavement as they narrativize stories of difference in the United States. Although my attention was focussed in this project on the survey exhibit *Many Voices, One Nation* at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH), it is clear that national museums of all kinds are necessarily implicated in, and connected to, efforts to engage with national pasts, presents, and futures. In this sense, the questions posed by this project relate in pronounced ways to the "national" element of the NMAH, and in particular, ask how national mythologies (and often competing national mythologies) are showcased, alluded to, diminished, or obfuscated. The focus on the national character of the NMAH in this project was intended to draw out the tensions inherent in representing a national past, and specifically, to investigate how the



national character of a history museum impacts curatorial choices and narrative strategies.

As a set of precursory questions, I began by considering the history of acquisition, collection, preservation and display as it relates to the modern museum broadly, and specifically to the museological life of a settler society such as the United States. As Donald Preziosi asks in “Myths of Nationality”, “How can we engage in truly effective critical investigations of the problems - the mythologies, in fact - of ‘national museum narratives’ without simultaneously engaging in a critical interrogation of the epistemological and ideological presuppositions of which modern museum and collecting practices are themselves both product and producer?” (56). That museums play a central role in the upholding of national mythologies is evidenced in the astounding amount of resources governments allocate to their maintenance and expansion. In addition to there being multiple forms of work done *in* and *on* museums, it is also clear that museums *work*, in the sense of tangibly supporting the project of national identity making. Museums are, without a doubt, a highly efficacious mode of representation and meaning-making for the nation state.

In relation to the work that museums do within and on behalf of the nation, the question of representation has become increasingly salient as demands for restorative and community-based museum practices proliferate. As Preziosi argues, “any critique of what is represented is inseparable from a more fundamental critique of what is understood by *representation* itself” (56). In considering the multiple understandings of representation as an action, it is clear that it is a highly contested process, often

interpreted as relating to practices of inclusion, consultation, and participation in museum praxis. This project has also contended with the limits of these understandings of representation, especially when these practices are exercised unevenly across different museums that are part of a singular network. How might the *Many, Voices, One Nation* exhibit have been different, if it had been developed by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), or the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)? These institutions exist, at least in part, because of a recognition that sovereignty and authority are inseparable from questions of representation, and of what *being represented* entails.

### **Museum Temporalities**

Crucially, this project engaged with the history of not only the Smithsonian Institution, but of the National Museum of American History itself, as both stories figure in consequential ways on the manner in which the past is evoked within the *Many Voices* exhibit. As a nation whose discomfort with the concept of history shaped its early mythologies, as well as its attitudes towards preservation, the patterns of collection and display that characterized early museological practices in the United States were shaped by a disdain for nostalgic tributes to regimes seen as the enemy of the new nation, as well as a desire to obliterate Indigenous populations through preservationist warfare that literally imagined indigeneity into the past, and laid the groundwork for settlers to become the new “natives” of the United States. The role of temporality in historical exhibitions is key in both an explicit and implicit sense. The historical exhibit is

by its very nature focussed on time, working to represent the passing of time through a punctuated narrative that grasps specific objects, stories, and events in order to mark a forward journey towards the present. Implicit in this engagement with time is the manner in which temporality can be used to bracket histories of domination, extricating them from the continuum of national time, turning them from contemporary forces that persist, to anachronies of the past. As Patrick Wolfe (2006) points out, because settlers come to stay, settler colonialism functions as “a structure, not an event” (388). Temporality therefore represents a critical site of interrogation in understanding the role of national history museums in relegating colonialism to the past, thereby foreclosing decolonial futures.

The connections between the colonial project and patterns of collection and display in settler society museums figured prominently in the early research for this project, especially as these dynamics related to the establishment of the modern museum in the late nineteenth century. The Smithsonian Institution, through the governance structure and mission of the National Museum of the American Indian and the adoption in the United States of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, has in many ways been at the forefront of museological shifts towards community-oriented curation, preservation and repatriation efforts. Without question, the NMAI represents a critical shift in the exhibiting of Indigenous artifacts in North America by engaging with Indigenous communities as living, sovereign entities, whose participation in, and oversight of, the care of their artifacts is a central component of their approach. Despite the important structural

changes prompted by the NMAI, I began this project with questions about the degree to which the reach of the NMAI has extended beyond its walls to impact the manner in which Indigenous communities are represented in other areas of the Smithsonian Institution. Importantly, the *Nation to Nation* exhibit, with its powerful focus on treaties between the United States and Indigenous nations, opened in 2014 at the NMAI, three years before the *Many Voices* exhibit opened at the NMAH. As a complex and multi-vocal network of museums, I wondered to what degree the *Many Voices* exhibit would engage with the concept of native sovereignty in its portrayal of the colonial period, and how the exhibit would portray contemporary indigeneity in the final sections of the exhibit. While it was clear that attention had been paid to avoid some of the more egregious colonial tropes in the earlier sections of the exhibit, native voices all but disappeared as the exhibit drew on, and vanished entirely by the time the exhibit reached its final section. As a result, the consequences for native futurity, sovereignty, and resistance, embedded in the narrative of the exhibit are dire, leading to a question of whether museums can be decolonial spaces, and what barriers exist for national museums in settler societies in particular.

In response to challenges to normative museological practices, museums within the Smithsonian Institution, such as the NMAI and the NMAAHC, have pivoted towards collaborative initiatives aimed at soliciting input and guidance from groups and communities whose objects they display. Despite these shifts, the normalizing influence of national museums begs the question of whether and to what degree they can become or give way to institutions of resistance, liberation, and justice. In her 2014 book

*Mohawk Interruptus*, Audra Simpson explores the consequences of a politics of refusal - a position intended to resist the assimilationist forces inherent in acts of institutional recognition. Beginning with the example of passports she asks "what does it mean to refuse a passport - what some consider to be a gift or a right, the freedom of mobility and residency? What happens when we refuse what all (presumably) "sensible" people perceive as good things? What does this refusal do to politics, to sense, to reason?" (1). When we consider this question in relation to Indigenous people, she argues that "the assumptions and the *histories* that structure what is perceived to be "good" (and utilitarian goods themselves) shift and stand in stark relief. The positions assumed by people who refuse "gifts" may seem reasoned, sensible, and in fact deeply correct" (1). What are the consequences of a politics of refusal for national museums? How can we understand the act of non-participation, the refusal to be represented, as a reasoned and just response? Repatriation debates have certainly brought this issue to the fore, but there is a larger sense in which the national museums of settler states themselves compel compliance with and celebration of a politics of recognition that has been entirely theirs in the making. The Indigenous perspective, concludes Simpson, allows us to see that "a good is not a good for everyone" (1). Here, the troubling insistence on national singularity evident in the names of the NMAH, NMAI, and NMAAHC, as well as in the title *Many Voices, One Nation* underscores the pervasive forcefulness of settler colonialism. While community-based and collaborative approaches appear to attend to the issues of representation, object ownership, and the ethics of display, these

approaches also fail (perhaps deliberately) to address the deeper problem of national authority in the practice of representing Indigenous people in national museums.

In researching the National Museum of American History (NMAH), the question of ethical museological practice has been at the core of my inquiry. Although it is in many ways a more recently established branch within the Smithsonian Institution, the NMAH holds a particular rhetorical potency in a nation whose relationship to the past remains so deeply fractured. In part, this fracturedness is a mainstay of settler-state existence, and of the ongoing consequences of slavery. Temporality and its manipulation in historical exhibits is central to the concerns raised by this project. Strakosch and Macoun (2012) describe the relationship between settler colonialism and time as one in which the settler colonial project produces and distorts time, in order to situate itself authoritatively in the present, and decidedly orient itself towards a future that it claims for itself. They write that “...colonialism does not just take place *in time*. It constructs narratives *of time* in ways that create particular political relationships in the present, and attempts to move itself through time to a certain political future” (49). The specificity of time as it relates to the settler state sets it apart from what postcolonial frameworks can successfully theorize. “Most extractive colonies have undergone a transformative phase of decolonisation and are subject to ‘post-colonial’ forms of imperial control” (41). Postcolonial frameworks depart from the assumption that a political transformation or shift has taken place, and while the contributions of postcolonial theory help elucidate the nature of settler-colonialism, it also leaves key characteristics of settler nations untheorized. This, argue Strakosch and Macoun, can

contribute to situating 'real' colonialism in the past, and further orients present-day discussions of colonialism as having to attend to the 'legacies', 'heritage' or 'reverberative aftermath' of colonialism in today's world" (43). The question thus remains as to whether a national museum can represent a present in which colonialism remains present as a structure that has continued unabated for centuries. In the case of the Smithsonian Institution, the question concerns the manner in which such an orientation is expressed across its component museums, rather than being localized only in museums such as the NMAI and NMAAHC.

Like all texts, museum exhibits are always subject to the influence of the moments in which they are read. Moments, circumstances, and contexts constrain and expand readings of museum exhibitions, diminishing certain interpretations and enhancing others, all while interacting with the identities and experiences of those who visit exhibits and engage with their displays. As exhibits that engage directly with the passage of time and narratives of temporality, chronology, and memory, historical exhibits are highly susceptible to the moments that encircle them. Over the course of a project as broad and as lengthy as a dissertation, research on museum exhibits, even when those exhibits are part of an institution's "permanent" offerings, is impacted by the cumulative effects of so many moments. What I had identified as areas of concern for the project at the outset in 2011 have developed in important ways as social, political, and museological shifts have cast new light on the work I set out to undertake. Museums and exhibits have opened and closed, the discursive landscape of the politics of the past in the United States has erupted in complicated ways, and a global

pandemic has thrown us into a new set of relations and practices of proximity and distance, in which unequal access to resources and support has stamped the existence of so many in our world. Indeed, the world looks nothing like it did in 2011. While the impact of these various moments poses challenges for a research project that aims to be cohesive, it is also a highly generative feature of the research process that constantly opens the work to new and emergent influences.

The uprisings calling for racial justice in the United States that began in May 2020 have spurred a renewed debate around commemoration and public pasts. Since the uprisings began, statues, flags and other symbolic imagery has been removed from public spaces across the United States. The removal of some symbolic objects and images has coincided with the retention of others, leaving behind it a patchwork of commemorative items that seem variously to reference different pasts, just as they gesture towards different futures. The kernel of the significance of the uprisings relates in part to time - to the insistence on the contemporaneity of the structures that made slavery possible, and that uphold injustice in the present. What futures can such a present beget? The uprisings have been sharp reminders of the impossibility of resolution and absolution in a context where trauma is ongoing, injury is continuously inflicted, and violence is unrelentingly reproduced. They ought also to be understood as an appeal for futures of color - futures which can form the basis for maintaining resilience, cultivating hope, and taking action.



## Museum Futures

What could a museum do *in* and *with* the future? What effects could it produce, what processes might it support? What worlds might it bring into view? In her introduction to the 2015 science fiction collection *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Walidah Imarisha asserts that "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction" (3). Can speculative theorizing help us to overcome the barriers imposed on our thinking by the realities of the material circumstances in which museums find themselves? How might speculative theorizing in museum studies open up new possibilities for engagement with the past, its stories, and its objects? What futures might come into view if the temporalities of settler colonialism and the institution of slavery were disrupted? As Caitlin Gunn argues in her article "Black Feminist Futurity: From Survival Rhetoric to Radical Speculation", the era of "alternative facts" ushered in by the administration of Donald Trump displayed in shockingly clear terms how the phrase's "rich and speculative nature" could be mobilized to "prop up white supremacy, falsehoods, and state violence" (16). The manipulation of narratives of the past, present, and future in the construction of white futures is nothing new, but as Gunn concludes, "white supremacists are not the only ones capable of imagining alternatives" (16). How, then, can the power of speculation be harnessed in order to imagine, design, and display futures in which the centrality of white experience in the United States is unseated?

The first novella in the science fiction trilogy *Binti*, written by Nnedi Okorafor tells the story of a young university student, traveling away from her home and family for the first time in her life. Binti unwittingly finds herself at the center of an age-old conflict between two peoples, and lands in the center of a violent massacre in which she is the only survivor. At the center of the conflict is a stolen body part, the stinger organ taken from the leader of one of the Meduse, a jellyfish-like people. Their leader's stinger was stolen, and brought to a museum at the university, to be displayed and researched. "My stinger is my people's power" asserts the Chief, "They took it from us. That is an act of war" (62). What follows is an account of how Binti successfully translates the concerns of the Meduse to the university leadership, resulting in their decision to return the body part. "Museum specimen of such prestige are highly prized at our university," says the professor who addresses the Meduse Chief, "however such things must only be acquired with permission from the people to whom they belong. We will return it to you immediately" (78). The implausibility of an object being repatriated within the timespan of a faculty meeting is part of the brilliance of the passage. The return of the object is *immediate*, it is not part of an aspirational process of reconciliation, but rather is central to an acknowledgement of a wrong whose consequences are felt in the present moment.

The Legacy Museum in Montgomery Alabama offers an example of how temporality can be manipulated differently in museum spaces, in order to bring the past into the present, and bring the need for different futures to the fore. Situated near the Alabama dock and rail station, the museum's building once served as a warehouse for

enslaved people who were bought and sold at auction close by. The museum's exhibit, *From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, opened to the public in 2018, and aims to serve as an "engine for education about the legacy of racial inequality and for the truth and reconciliation that leads to real solutions to contemporary problems" (Legacy Museum). The museum's location in a building that was a human warehouse throughout the nineteenth century establishes a connection to the past at a molecular level: the very site of the museum is one in the same as the site on which the injustice it confronts took place. It is also, in very palpable terms, a museum of the present, in its determination to represent mass incarceration as a contemporary manifestation of the structures of white supremacist domination that undergirded enslavement. In its attention to "real solutions", the museum also names its purpose, insisting on the role of the museum in helping to develop just outcomes in the future.

How can we use the potential of what historian Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) describes as "freedom dreaming" in order to envisage, represent, and work towards liberatory futures in museums? Freedom dreaming, he posits, involves a rejection of the confines of rationality, in order to move towards possibilities conceived of on the bases of "freedom and love", which, he argues, may be the "most revolutionary ideas available to us" (11). Returning to the etymological history of museums, it becomes clear that creativity, dreaming, and invention lie at the core of what the name 'museum' implies. We might understand Mnemosyne's role as the mother of the muses as a suggestion that memory ought not to exist without the work of dreams, and that remembering the past attains its full potential when we tether it to the future.

## Appendix

### Introductory Text from the *Many Voices, One Nation* Exhibit

The people of North America came from many cultures and spoke many different languages long before the founding of the United States, even before European contact. In creating the new nation, early leaders envisioned a country that promised opportunity and freedom - but only for some. As the population grew, the people who lived in the United States found ways to negotiate, or work out, what it meant to be American. That negotiation continues. This exhibition explores how the many voices of people in America have shaped our nation.

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