

# **Basic Framework for Considering Presentations of Native American History and Culture in Museums Run by or Focusing on Native Americans**

(Written for NMAI, the National Museum of the American Indian)

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## **I. Introduction**

My expertise, to the degree it exists, stems not from any specialization in American Indian history but from two decades of studying American history in general, including Native history, and examining how that history has been portrayed to the public in high school history textbooks, museums, movies, and historic sites. In that process, I have concluded that Americans have been profoundly mis-educated about their past. Nowhere is that miseducation more apparent than about American Indian history. As the late Michael Dorris put it, in learning about Native Americans, "One does not start from point zero, but from minus ten."<sup>1</sup>

Any museum run by Native Americans or trying to present an American Indian viewpoint needs to understand and to challenge the more important misconceptions about Native history and culture in the non-Indian culture. A museum cannot accomplish this crucial goal unless (a) it avoids the errors and limited perspectives of the usual approaches to American Indian history, and (b) it confronts viewers directly with some of these errors and limitations, showing how a Native perspective can make visitors more knowledgeable, even wiser, about our national story.

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## **II. Ten Historical Issues (and three concerns)**

Ten themes or issues order, more or less chronologically, my analysis of how American Indian history is usually portrayed and mis-portrayed. Highlighted within these themes are boxed social archetypes — basic conventions about the past that most Americans accept without thought as part of our cultural heritage. Usually professors and writers about American history, as well as the public, fail even to notice these archetypes, let alone examine or challenge them. These lapses occur because authors of American history textbooks even on the college level are consumers rather than practitioners of history about the thousands of years before 1492. So are most of them when it comes to American Indian history during the last 500 years. Their very real expertise on the Civil War, the women's movement, or the Robber Barons does not help them understand and present findings from archaeology or glottochronology. Nor does living and being educated in American society help them understand and present American Indian history, unless authors take time to consult the growing and increasingly accurate secondary literature. Most textbook authors do not. As I showed in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, many high school history textbooks are not even written by the professors whose names are on their covers. Even when they did write them, authors often do not rely on a review of solid secondary sources but merely paraphrase earlier textbooks.<sup>2</sup>

It falls to museums run by Native people or focusing on American Indian history and culture to challenge these archetypes. Doing so explicitly — "Other museums tell you..." or "American history textbooks say... but this is our view" — will make for an exciting museum-going experience for everyone.

Arranged chronologically, these ten themes provide an overall organization of Native American history in general, not specific to any one people. I suggest that these points are so important that visitors who do not encounter them during their sojourns in your museum will leave it incompletely educated and inadequately challenged.

I also will present three general concerns that any person trying to present Native American history and culture accurately and honestly must face. These concerns derive from what the larger society and culture has said about Native Americans over the years and is still saying in its textbooks, historic sites, and popular culture. I will identify these sections by letter — A, B, and C — and will address each at some length when appropriate.

**A is the question of evidence:** how do we know what we present is accurate?

**B is the issue of historiography:** how have we as a society presented these matters in the past? How and why have our presentations changed over time?

**C refers to terminology:** what words are appropriately applied to such processes as the arrival and spread of Europeans and Africans throughout the Americas? What are the correct names for different groups of American Indians? for American Indians as a whole?

Your museum has an opportunity to teach more accurate history and present more complete perspectives on each of these three concerns and on the ten chronological issues. It does not want to miss the chance.

## **1. Origin**

More than 90% of American history textbooks and more than 90% of the people who teach American history in high school and college begin by telling as fact that people first arrived in the Americas by walking across the Bering Strait. So do most history museums that address the issue. During an Ice Age, they tell us, the water level of the oceans dropped, exposing a land isthmus. This crossing may have happened. It also may not have. It should be taught as a hypothesis, not as fact.

To my knowledge, the evidence for this hypothesis is scant. There are cultural and linguistic similarities between American Indian cultures and some cultures in northeastern Asia. There are also similarities in DNA. However, the record of human tools and remains does not become older as one goes from the contiguous United States through the Yukon and into Alaska. There is, in short, no archaeological evidence to support the Bering Strait hypothesis. This dearth might be because the evidence now lies underwater. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and the Bering Strait crossing may have occurred as we are told.

Alternatively, humans may have arrived in the Americas by boat. They got to Australia more than 40,000 years ago, and no matter what happens to water levels one can never walk to Australia. So we know that humans invented boats many thousands of years ago. Indeed, primitive hominids before us got to islands in Indonesia by boat. Of course, there is no archeological record of these boats and cannot be, for no "primitive people" were so foolish as to build boats from stone. To my knowledge, the evidence for the boat hypothesis is also scant: it is harder to walk down the coastline or inland from Uelen in eastern Siberia, perhaps especially during an Ice Age, than it is to go by kayak or larger boat. Also, in historic times people have accidentally arrived by boat. Moreover, the cultural, linguistic, and genetic similarities among Native Americans may point to a common origin, in the distant past, among a group so small that they might have come by boat. But again, we have no archaeological evidence to support the boat hypothesis.

Less likely but possible hypotheses include arrival by boat across the wider Pacific, such as from Japan to Peru, or from the other direction, from northern Norway across the ice or from Iberia, perhaps before today's Europeans got there. The Museum of the Sixth Floor in Dallas provides a good model of how to present likely and less likely hypotheses (about the assassination of John F. Kennedy) without dismissing the latter, but also without implying that all hypotheses are equally plausible.

Not only are archaeologists and others unsure about how Native peoples got here, they debate even more strenuously when. So again, Native museums must not present a date. We don't know what date to present. Each main contestant — c.13,000 years ago, c.35,000, and c.50,000 or more — has its adherents. Museums should present it as an open question, with a brief account of the evidence for each. Moreover, some archaeologists hold that about 13,000 BP a comet or large meteor exploded over Canada, killing entire species of megafauna and reducing the human population from millions to perhaps just a few thousand. If so, that event wrought havoc with the archaeological record and perhaps the genetic record as well and must be taken into account when discussing the North American past.

**Archetype to challenge:** People "of course" got here across the Bering land bridge, c.13,000 BP, then spread throughout the Americas.

Besides teaching that we don't know for sure how or when the first Native Americans arrived, museums should impress visitors that they were fully human, as smart as you or me. They were not some proto-Neanderthals, as the cave dwellers of ancient Europe are often pictured. Many American history textbooks distort the basic humanity of the first American Indians. In his textbook American History, for example, John Garraty, Professor of History at Columbia University, calls

them "the wanderers," not "the explorers." He tells how they "moved slowly southward and to the east.... Many thousand years passed before they had spread over all of North and South America." Again, we don't know that. Many archaeologists believe that people reached most parts of the Americas within a thousand years, too rapidly to allow easy archaeological determination of the direction and timing of their migration. Most absurdly, Garraty writes, "They did not know that they were exploring a new continent."<sup>3</sup> Language like this is language of the conqueror. It's bad history because it is flatly inaccurate. Since a "continent" is "a huge land mass," it is inconceivable that the first Native Americans could not tell they were exploring one!

Native museums should make one additional point: most Native peoples have a mythic understanding of their origin in the Americas that does not involve coming from elsewhere. Often Native origin myths tell how "we the people" emerged from the earth. This is theologically meaningful: the beloved earth and its prior life forms indeed made possible the emergence of people upon it. As history it is no more accurate than the two accounts in "Genesis" or other religious myths. Museums should teach compartmentalization, which is how most non-Native Americans handle the tension between historical and religious accounts. That is, Southern Baptists, Mormons, or Buddhists learn one way of conceiving the history of mankind at church or temple and quite a different way in biology or history class. Both have meaning. It is too simple either to dismiss the spiritual account or to label compartmentalization as mere hypocrisy.

## **2. Basic interrelations**

All American Indian societies probably fit into three overall groups. The most recent arrivals are the Diné, sometimes spelled Dineh, whom outsiders call Navajos and Apaches. They came to what is now the contiguous United States about 1,000 years ago and to Canada and Alaska maybe 6,000 years ago. Inuits or Eskimos have been going back and forth from Siberia to Alaska more or less continuously for at least 2,000 years, probably longer. All others, from the Micmacs in the Canadian Maritimes to the Yaghans on Tierra del Fuego, are from the third group. If one goes back far enough, this group shares a common language, culture, and genetic inheritance. Again, to the degree that anthropologists, ethnohistorians, and other experts, Native and non-Native, differ about the above, these ideas should be presented as hypotheses, not facts.

The ensuing subdivisions into diverse language and cultural groups are also important and should be shown somewhere in the museum. A museum cannot allow its decision to focus on specific societies to obscure the cultural relationships and historical connections among them.

Museums should also show how the rapid subsequent differentiation of Native cultures resulted from their intelligent coping with different environments as well as from their developing different thematic ideas in different ways. Learning about these differences is part of the delight of discovery that awaits the visitor, just as it is fun and educational to experience French culture as different from Spanish, Moroccan, or Malian.

**Archetype to challenge:** Native Americans were or are all alike. They were primitive, or savage, or equalitarian, or environmentalists, and so forth.

### **A. Evidence issue: How do we know what we know about the distant past?**

Throughout the museum, but most especially regarding the first two subheads above, visitors need to know how we know what we know. It makes no sense to try to teach visitors "the right answer" to any pre-1492 question — "How did they live?" "What was the place of women?" "What did they believe?" — without also presenting some of the basis for our answers. In my experience, American Indian and non-Indian people are interested in such diverse modes of analysis as glottochronology (using changes in language to help date and understand peoples' histories and relationships), carbon dating, DNA analysis, and the study of oral history and legend. What makes these methods come alive are the arguments by experts within each field and the disagreements by experts from different disciplines.

**Archetype to challenge:** we know what happened before 1492 and will teach it to you. Period.

### **3. Pre-contact societies were not static**

Museums often say, "Here is what American Indian culture was like before Columbus," or "Here is Lenape (or some other specific society's) culture before Europeans came." This is understandable, since they often do not have the space to present more than one exhibit on the distant past, but it is a mistake nonetheless. Most American Indian cultures were always in a state of change.

Native peoples cannot even be accurately mapped, except at a given point in time. It would be good to show this problem by mapping Natives at several points in time:

- 1492 (as accurately as can be done, telling the basis for the map and admitting its uncertainties),
- 1600 (after the first pandemics and the Spanish but before the arrival of the Dutch, English, French, etc.),
- 1810 (just before the calamitous War of 1812),
- 1890 (after the end of independent nationhood), and
- today (including urban American Indians, not just reservations).

**Archetype to challenge:** the single map, showing where American Indians lived, undated.

#### 4. Dealing with the evolutionary continuum

The primary overall archetype with which Americans approach their past is cultural evolution — not just change, but "progress." We know our society is "better," "higher," "more developed." Look at what we can do! Look at the web! at modern medicine!

Anthropology and history courses used to teach that we have progressed from "savagery" to "civilization." Museums can confront this "onward and upward" linear progression on four fronts:

First, "higher civilization" is higher in only one key way: a more developed division of labor. This division of labor allows for occupational specialization, which in turn means that people can develop more and more technology around what they do. This development means the society as a whole can do more. But more does not necessarily mean better. Is it better to have a religion with full-time priests who have time to write modern treatises that discuss details of interpretation about books written in the seventeenth century regarding doctrines developed in the fourth century to explicate thoughts of a religious leader who lived around 10 AD? Compared to, say, a religion all of whose members participate in rituals every spring to bond with crucial spiritual aspects of the environment and try to ensure a bountiful growing and hunting season? "Better" and "worse" may not apply; only "different."

**Archetype to challenge:** Higher civilization is better, nicer, more "civilized."

Second, individuals in societies at different levels of development are not, themselves, at different levels of development. Jared Diamond begins *Guns, Germs, and Steel* with this point, discussing a very intelligent "stone age" New Guinean friend of his. In various ways, such as the ridiculous "\$24 myth" about the purchase of Manhattan, schoolchildren still learn that American Indians weren't very smart. Museums need to address this point overtly.

Third, there are reasons why cultures did and did not develop a division of labor. Diamond suggests that the availability of animals suitable for domestication may be key. He suggests other keys, and so have other scholars, all as hypotheses. The question needs to be asked, however, even if we cannot and hence should not answer it with certainty. If a museum does not ask it, if museum-goers do not face the question, "Why didn't American Indians develop capitalism, the automobile, the web...?" racism rushes in to fill the vacuum thus left in their psyches. "Because we're better,"

whites whisper to themselves, so quietly that they cannot hear the message — but it sinks in subliminally nonetheless.

**Archetype to challenge:** People in "higher" cultures are more intelligent.

Fourth, American Indians did develop higher civilizations. Look at the Aztecs, the Incas, and Cahokia. To be sure, museums must acknowledge the contradiction between this line of "defense" and the first three points. The contradiction can be resolved only by admitting it straight-forwardly, telling that life under the Aztecs, for example, was probably much less pleasant than among the Abenakis, say, with their rudimentary division of labor. A museum might also admit openly that it is emphasizing the fourth point only to counter three centuries of slander. Nevertheless, your museum may want to convince visitors that Native people were capable of, and did, rule vast areas, build big buildings, support large cities, sculpt beautiful pieces, and the like.

**Archetype to challenge:** Native Americans before 1492 were primitive and never accomplished much.

### **C. Terminology issue: "civilized"**

Museums can point out that "more developed" does not necessarily "more civilized" in the familiar meaning of that term. Was the Third Reich civilized, for instance? If so — and most anthropologists would answer yes — what does that mean about the word? In what ways would we prefer the "civilized" Third Reich to the "less civilized" Arawaks who met Columbus? If we refuse to label Nazi Germany civilized, are we not using the term to imply a certain comity? If so, we must consider the Arawaks "civilized," while Columbus and his Spaniards become "primitive" if not "savage."

Individuals living in "higher civilizations" may not be happier or more fulfilled. We see this with the Aztecs: as the Spaniards challenged Aztec rule over central Mexico, they recruited allies among nearby groups who did not enjoy Aztec dominance. Probably many people in the Aztec empire would have lived happier lives under "lower civilization." The same reasoning holds in the opposite direction, of course: the "civilization" that the Spaniards imposed upon the previously more equalitarian societies on Haiti was an intolerable burden to the Arawaks.

Ironically, the complex division of labor that anthropologists mean by civilized also results in societies marked by inequality and able to support large specialized armies. Precisely these "civilized" societies are then more likely to resort to savage violence to conquer more "primitive" societies.

**Terms to challenge:** “primitive,” “savage,” “civilized,” “higher civilization,” more “developed,” etc.

## 5. Contact

Every museum that treats Native Americans must point out that Columbus's return to Haiti in 1493 was the most important single event in the history of the hemisphere and perhaps of the entire human species, excepting only the invention of agriculture (which was a process, not an event, and happened more than once). It transformed the Americas; it also transformed Europe and the world; the transformation continues today.

The first key element of this transformation was disease. If we look around the world in, say, 1892, we see that Europe and extensions of Europe like the United States and Australia dominated it. Only a handful of nations were not under the sway of Europeans: Ethiopia, Japan, perhaps Thailand or Bhutan. Even large countries like India, China, Nigeria, Australia, and Brazil were run by Europeans, formally or informally. By 1992, a century later, Europeans had gone home from most of these nations. Indians now run India, Chinese run China, and Nigerians run Nigeria. Not so in the Americas, Hawaii, New Zealand, or Australia. These places had been not only been conquered but also settled, or, more accurately, resettled, by Europeans (and Africans). Why? Disease played a key role. We must tell the story of the greatest pandemics in the history of the world. Most Americans still don't know it.

**Archetype to challenge:** the Americas were largely vacant before 1492.

The entire Columbian Exchange then comes into the narrative. Several recent high school American history textbooks do tell this story, but none did before about 1995, so most people don't know it. Museums must tell it.

In part it is a "success story": Native peoples "contributing" half of the foodstuffs grown throughout the world today, many of the medicines, and so forth. Jack Weatherford's Indian Givers presents a good popular summary of the exchange. Weatherford also shows its impact on world populations and economies, making possible the eventual dominance of European nations over



Islamic and Asian nations. Seeds of Change, edited by Herman Viola and Carolyn Margolis, does a good job on the exchange itself.<sup>4</sup>

In part, it is not a happy story, including disease vectors and environmental consequences. Surely the story should be told "flatly," by which I do not mean boringly, for it is gripping, important, and continues today. Rather, it should be told without valorizing or demonizing either "side," since much of the process was unintentional.

**Terms to challenge:** "discover,"  
"settle," "wilderness."

Museums should also point out that Natives were partners in the European exploration of the Americas. From the help the Arawaks gave to Columbus after Santa Maria ran aground off Haiti in 1492, to the repair of Francis Drake's Golden Hind in California in 1579, to the critical information and supplies provided to Lewis and Clark in 1803, to the Crows' participation on the U.|S. side in Custer's attack at the Big Horn, "they couldn't have done it without us." Like the alliance and information provided the Pilgrims by Massasoit, these gestures need to be placed in context, so Europeans don't come across as savage schemers or Natives as haplessly hospitable.

**Archetype to challenge:** white man  
against "the wilderness."

## 6. Invasion

Building on previous themes, visitors need to understand that the nation-state is a piece of social technology more powerful than the airplane, more pervasive than the telephone, and more dangerous than the atomic bomb. Indeed, the bomb could not and would not have been built without the nation-state. Most Americans take the nation-state for granted. But it is a recent human invention. Much of Europe and most of the Americas did not have nation-states until after 1492. The nation-state may not be "better" than smaller-scale societies, but once your neighbor gets one, you had better develop your own. Just as unequal military technology helped the Spanish take Haiti (and various European countries take the rest of the hemisphere), so did the nation-state. Visitors need to understand its role. They also need to perceive that from the "bottom up," individual people are likely to prefer living in societies organized on the village or confederacy level.

Other technological differences that made conquest possible were steel knives and axes, guns, cannons, and some additional social technology, such as double-entry bookkeeping,

proselytizing religion, and bureaucracy. Many American Indian museums understandably do not want to focus on European dominance," but brief accounts of these factors are in order. In their absence, the key question, "Why did European societies conquer Native societies?" cannot be answered and usually goes unasked. Again, into this vacuum rushes the whispered message, "Because Europeans are better." This message even makes it into the psyches of Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans. Native American museums must counter it.

**Archetype to challenge:** buying Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads! More generally, Europeans are said to have got vacant land for nothing or next to nothing, or bought it from France; certainly it was "not a conquest." But it was.

The orientation of the newcomers helped them want to conquer and helped them conquer. Europeans sought profit — gold, other riches, and trade goods. In the highly stratified societies they left, self-worth was defined primarily by acquiring material possessions. "More" was necessary to define oneself as successful. Without focusing unduly on the conqueror, some well-chosen words can make the point, such as Black Elk's analysis of entire steamboats going down the Missouri "loaded with dried bison tongues. You can see that the men who did this were crazy." Assisting the conquering was the proselytizing religion of the conquerors. Unlike Native religions, it was portable, not tied to sacred places in the earth where important mythic things happened.

At first, Native people were brought into an economic nexus to the emerging world economy. So long as this connection lasted — through the slave trade, the sassafras trade, the fur trade, the deer trade, forced mining, etc. — Europeans had reasons to value Natives. They made alliances with some groups against others, who in turn made alliances with other European nations, thus increasing the level of Native warfare. This is another example of violence increasing with "civilization." When Europeans no longer perceived Natives as useful, they no longer perceived them as equal human beings either, leading to expulsion and occasionally genocide. It is important, too, to recognize that some Europeans from the start favored peaceful relations.

**Archetype to challenge:** textbook accounts of the War of 1812, which mystify this war, both as to cause and effect. Show a map of the war, with American Indians typically omitted. Show that desire for American Indian land was the key cause of the war, and American Indians were the key losers of it. Indeed, all American Indian Wars after 1815 were mopping up operations, because Natives had no more international allies.

Even in the nineteenth century, relations between Native Americans and European Americans were often peaceful, especially so long as a cash nexus obtained. Plains Indians were much more likely to help pioneers cross to California during the Gold Rush, for example, sometimes making money as guides, helping them ferry a river, or selling them horses or fish, than to attack.

**Archetype to challenge:** the circled wagon train, John Wayne lying prone protected by boxes, American Indians whooping and firing aimlessly while presenting broadside targets. Never happened once, outside the Wild West shows.

## **B. Historiography issue: The other side of the wars**

The United States tells itself all manner of lies about this process, mostly by omission. For example, our textbooks often portray Sherman's March to the Sea during the Civil War as the first example of total war, involving destruction of crops and homes — war made against civilians as well as armies. Besides being an absurd exaggeration of Sherman's campaign through Georgia and the Carolinas, such a claim completely obliterates 150 years of total war against American Indian peoples.

Surely William F. Buckley is right to say, "History is the polemics of the victor." Surely whites won. Challenge visitors directly and overtly to ask themselves: what was this long process like from the "other side?" Or from an even-handed vantage point?

## **7. Syncretism in American culture**

Contact with Native Americans from 1492 to today prompted vast ideational changes in European culture and then in European American culture. Chapter four of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* summarizes some of these influences. I will not repeat them here except to note that they include the impact of American Indian ideas, as mediated by European perception of Native societies to be sure, on European philosophy, political ideology, styles of governing, gender relations, and even

religion.

These points are almost unknown even to historians outside of this specific era. It is also crucial to point out that many European Americans were open to and interested in Native American peoples and cultures. Indeed, other European Americans saw this as a problem and took steps to prevent whites from joining American Indian society. After a successful war, European Americans also typically forced Native groups to repatriate whites whom they had captured, even if the whites no longer wanted to return.

The entire notion of syncretism — that cultures often progress by combining ideas from two or more cultures to form something new — is familiar only to people who have taken anthropology courses. This is a small subset of Americans. Syncretism is a critical concept to teach. It reduces the ethnocentrism of European Americans, who come to understand that today's European/world culture had antecedents, including ideas from non-Western cultures. Simultaneously it helps Native Americans understand that their ideas, not just their crops, made a tremendous impact around the world and continue to do so today.

**Archetype to challenge:** the frontier. This idea puts the observer in the urban East, gazing at the West. No such line existed, with whites on one side, American Indians on the other. In reality, Native-, European-, and African-Americans talked, worked, sometimes lived, and quarreled and fought together for decades.

#### **A. How do we know American Indian societies influenced European culture?**

To be sure, museums need to put some of the above points tentatively. Was it just coincidence that the Protestant Reformation began a quarter century after news reached Europe of Native societies, some of which were organized very differently and much less hierarchically than Europe's societies on earth or projections into heaven? I don't think so, but it's hard to prove this kind of linkage to everyone's satisfaction. The same holds for the Iroquois's influence on the United States Constitution, either directly through Franklin and others, or indirectly through prior influence on Locke and Montesquieu and other European political philosophers. The point is not to be defensive about the claims, but not to preach them either. Maybe raising them as questions would be most effective.

**Archetype to challenge:** democracy came from ancient Greece and less ancient England, period.

### **8. Syncretism in Native cultures**

Native cultures changed rapidly after 1492. Many groups that had been only loosely confederated developed more centralized nation-states. Later American Indians adopted formal democracy. Syncretic religious developments incorporated elements of Christianity and pre-existing Native American ideas to form new beliefs and practices.

Many American Indians became de-agriculturalized, perhaps even some of the groups who now live as gathering and hunting peoples deep in the Amazon. This was a way of coping with the newcomers' predations and diseases. The Plains Indian culture — surely the most famous of all American Indian cultures — developed, flowered, and was ended, all in less than two centuries.

**Archetype to challenge:** roaming Indians. Most Indians were sedentary before 1492. Contact with whites caused many to "roam," owing to specialization to fit the world economy, warfare, and the arrival of the horse from Spain.

## 9. Dealing with racism

From almost the beginning, Europeans treated Native Americans as their racial inferiors. The trade in American Indian slaves began from west to east across the Atlantic, then ran from what is now the United States to the Caribbean, and continued further west within the United States and Mexico. It lasted for more than 350 years, until at least 1863, but most high school American history textbooks and courses omit it entirely. Native museums should not, unless the areas they cover were unaffected by the trade. Most areas were affected.

At first, many Native societies were open to anyone who wished to join, Africans and Europeans included. Some of the newcomers knew valuable skills and languages and became trusted advisors or diplomats. Their children were usually "fully Indian," whatever that means, and often became leaders. Interracial American Indian children who grew up in white society, on the other hand — Pocahontas's offspring excepted — fared quite differently. Whites put them down as "half-breeds" if they were part white.

If they were part black, whites pushed them outside the borders of white society entirely, leading to the formation of tri-racial peoples. These groups — Melungeons, "Brass Ankles," "Creoles," "Red Bones," etc. — self-identified as American Indians or as no one racial group. Today many Seminoles and Lumbees are accepted as American Indians. Gradually, however, especially in the United States South, Native societies absorbed some of the racism of the now larger cultures around them.

**Term to challenge:** half-breed. This term should be as discredited as the eugenics movement.

Another key problem was lack of standing in the [white] legal system. This legal inequality was visible as early as the Pequot War and continues even today, in a sense, with the B.I.A. scandal. It meant that when gold was discovered on Native American land, for example, whites would come in and take it, while when gold was discovered on European American land, the European American owner usually became rich from it. Indeed, since American Indians usually were prohibited from testifying against whites, if a white person with standing wanted a Native person's possession, he could simply take it.

**Archetype to challenge:** We "gave" American Indians reservations, often endowing them with payments or special privileges like hunting and fishing rights beyond their borders. (Actually, forming reservations was a taking process, taking most of the land owned by Indians and confining them to the remainder.)

Despite repeated tries, American Indians never obtained statehood, even in Oklahoma. Native museums can tell of the attempts. They can also tell of the repeated fraud in the BIA and its predecessor agency and of the protracted lawsuit about it.

Coupled with the centuries-long record of military and diplomatic defeats, the racism wore down American Indian culture, leading to alcoholism, suicide, disorganized families, and other social problems. As early as the 1650s, some Native people in the East lost belief in their old gods, since the newcomers were doing better, including suffering much less from smallpox and other plagues. The Ghost Dance revival and other innovations spoke to this issue but with only partial success.

The racism continued to the recent past. Eugenics programs targeted Eastern Indians and tri-racial peoples in Vermont and Virginia. Adoption targeted Western Indians, hoping to "kill the Indian and save the child."

**Archetype to challenge:** American Indians could not or would not acculturate. (Actually, acculturation did nothing for them in the larger culture except make them tempting targets.)

### **C. Terminology issue: names on our atlas**

Many racist terms remain on the American landscape. Native Americans are upset with names like "Devils Lake," "Heathen Meadow," "Devils Tower," and the like. They realize that European Americans often gave such names to their sacred sites precisely when they learned that these places figured importantly in Native religions. American Indians near Devils Tower, Wyoming, consider the name blasphemous. To them, it is a holy site, "The Bear's Lair." "It's like calling the Vatican the 'house of the Devil,'" said one Native American.<sup>5</sup> Contempt for Native religion was the reason why the Spanish destroyed the books of the Mayan Indians and the religious buildings of the Incas.

"Squaw" is a plainly derogatory term. Whether it derives from a French corruption of an Iroquois epithet for vagina, analogous to "cunt" in English, is unimportant, because even if it is merely an Algonquian prefix meaning "female," it has taken on contemptuous overtones over the centuries. Hence many Native Americans are unhappy with place names and political jurisdictions incorporating "squaw."

The issue of societal names is more complex. "Calling Native Americans Bad Names," the Arizona "entry" in Loewen, *Lies Across America*, offers a handy introduction.<sup>6</sup> Some Native peoples — Apaches, Alaskan Eskimos — have chosen not to make an issue of the errors. Others are struggling to rid themselves of derogatory terms applied by their traditionally hostile neighbors or by the first Europeans to meet them. Native museums can present this issue in a way that leads visitors to a sense of wonder — Wow, this is interesting! Isn't it amazing that I didn't know it before? — rather than chastising them for the errors.

**Terms to challenge:** heathen, devils, squaw, brave, sports mascots, especially "Redskins."

### **10. American Indians today: population resurgence, upward mobility, assimilation, and the maintenance of government-to-government relations**

Despite repeated (although not continuous) attempts by the United States government to end American Indian governments, American Indian nations maintain government-to-government relations to this day with the United States. Few people understand these relations, even though they

come into contact with the fact when they speed on a reservation or gamble at a casino. Native museums should explain these relations. They should also explain the government-to-government relations of the recent past, including:

- the Dawes Act,
- 1924 citizenship,
- service in the armed forces,
- acquiring a land base for some groups during the FDR years,
- termination efforts during the Eisenhower administration, and
- improvements for many nations during the Nixon administration.

**Archetype to challenge:** Indians as wards of the State, existing on handouts, government welfare.

The Civil Rights Movement galvanized Native Americans with the realization that nonwhite people could mobilize American public opinion and win redress for some past wrongs. One result was the American Indian Movement. Another was a "population explosion," as Native Americans who had chosen to deny their American Indian identity now stepped forward to claim it.

Some tribes whose land had been taken illegally won it back or won some compensation in federal court. Many tribes made use of new federal programs to improve adult education, health care, preschool education, etc. Some tribes persuaded private companies to locate on or near reservations and employ Native people. The gaming industry entered partnerships with Native Americans on reservations to develop casinos; these proved very successful if located near population centers. Again, Natives were able to do better when an economic nexus existed to tie them to the national and world economy.

The upward mobility and increased geographic mobility had its downside. Changing to a largely European diet has led to health problems, especially diabetes. Native languages are rapidly disappearing, perhaps along with other crucial elements of American Indian cultures. On the other hand, some new forms of syncretism have emerged, such as novels, movies, sculpture, prints, and other forms of art. It is an open question whether and how Native cultures will maintain themselves in the future. One key helpful element would be respect from non-Indian people.



**Archetype to challenge:** "authentic"  
Indian culture is that of the  
nineteenth century (or earlier).  
Anything else shows acculturation.

### **B. Historiography issue: Recent scholarship is better**

The Civil Rights Movement freed white historians to be less racist about America's past. This led in turn to a flowering of more accurate "Indian history" (really, the history of Native-European-African relations). Of course, some earlier work remains worthwhile. Movies, too, show an erratic but definite progression in how they present Native Americans, from savages to sidekicks to fully realized human beings. Native museums can:

- explain what makes for better scholarship,
- provide a bibliography of the most important and accurate works for visitors to take away, with the recommended books for sale in the Museum Store,
- supply a checklist of guidelines to apply to children's literature, and
- suggest sources for Native reviews of movies treating or by Native Americans.

**Archetype to challenge:** passages on  
American Indians from Laura Ingalls Wilder,  
*Little House on the Prairie* series.

\* \* \*

### **III. Putting These Ideas into Practice**

Here are some thoughts on ways to treat these ten themes and three concerns.

**1. Include an overall chronology** or one for a specific nation from a Native American point of view. Museums about American Indians are surely appropriate places for visitors to encounter American Indian "takes" on American history more generally. Native Americans divide American history quite differently — and sometimes not differently — than non-Indian peoples. B.C. means “before Christ,” of course, but Native speakers point out it can also mean “before Columbus,” “before contact,” and even “before casinos.”

**2. Compare overall Native population over time** to non-Native populations, 1490 to the present. Between 1890 and 1940, manuscript censuses show families ceasing to be American Indian in their self-identification or identification by the U.S. census taker. Then they reappear on tribal rolls or self-identified in the census after 1960 or 1970. This is especially common in states with no or

almost no reservations, such as Indiana and Vermont.

### **3. Maps can make points clear.**

— If the scholarship allows, map where Native groups lived in 1491, c.1600, 1810 (before the War of 1812), 1885 (before Dawes), and today. The comparisons show change. Also include an interactive “today map”: when viewers selects states, it shows reservations, populations by nation, other census data, a dot map of Natives (including in cities), and Native organizations and leading Native individuals with mini-biographies.

— “Map of Shame,” with all racist place names still extant (not only regarding Natives), including include those references to "Devil," "Heathen," etc., that have become contentious, and references to “Squaw” and other loaded terms. There will be hundreds.

— Map of Mascots, including those sports mascots that American Indian people have found offensive. (Perhaps it can also include those mascots that Native people have approved.)

— “Map of Just Heroes,” recognizing deceased non-Native persons such as Helen Hunt Jackson who worked for justice for Native peoples, yet whose stories have often been omitted or falsified because ultimately they lost. Their examples remain important for us as we act today in the civic arena. If Native museums do not remember these people, who will?

### **4. Combat public history that has defamed American Indians.**

"White" museums are always displaying American Indian artifacts with labels. Native American museums should display white artifacts with labels. In the area of public history, for example, museums can print full-size replicas of historical markers that make particularly egregious errors, such as state or community historical summaries that leave out American Indians. Then an appropriate label can point out the omissions. They can also mount photos or even models of inappropriate monuments, such as the sculpture of the notorious purchase of Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads that still stands absurdly in lower Manhattan. A caption then can point to the several idiocies of the sculpture. A large photo of the nearest example of “hieratic art” – sculptures that put European Americans on the top, towering over Native Americans – can illustrate a good label telling about the many similar sculptures around the U.S., situating them within the white supremacist thinking of the era when they went up, and deconstructing the terms they use.

Museums may also want to take note of the most popular woman on the U.S. public history landscape (by far): Sacagawea. On the one hand, she multi-tasked effectively alongside Lewis & Clark, foraging, hiking, and probably cooking, while carrying and caring for a newborn baby. On the other, she is of a long line of “Tonto” Natives celebrated and valorized by whites because she was on the white side.

### **5. Portray government-to-government relations**

Visitors need to understand the continuing rights that Natives do have, under their treaties with the U.S. Native museums can invite a nearby casino to help fund an exhibit about an exemplary casino, explaining its legality and what its profits have provided. An exhibit that shows

the perfidy of the B.I.A. in handling Indian land entrusted to their care and protection may also be useful.

#### **6. Give examples of words and terms of concern**

A passage on "savages" from the Little House on the Prairie series by Laura Ingalls Wilder might be an object to help bring out this concern, as would the language about Native Americans in Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence."

#### **7. Show examples of errors and omissions in history textbooks**

Copy and blow up a typical textbook map (found in all the textbooks I studied) of the Louisiana Purchase. All tell how Jefferson "doubled the size of the United States by buying Louisiana from France." He did no such thing. Moreover, no map shows any American Indian peoples. These maps are then also used to show the route taken by the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This makes sense: the geography was the same, and the one followed from the other. But again, with no American Indians on the maps, they misrepresent the expedition, ignoring its dependence on Native peoples. They also show that France owned the land, but it only owned the European rights to it.

**8. Biographies can bring out some of the ten themes and concerns.** Since we recently finished the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, maybe Ely Parker would be appropriate. Maybe a Native American in your area, including people from the last half of the twentieth century.

#### **9. Many Native objects or series of objects, such as changes in clothing over time, show syncretism.**

So do books, CDs, and DVDs by Native authors and artists, Inuit sculpture, oil paintings, and the foods in your café! All can be used to teach this crucial term.

#### **10. Compare Native and Non-Native Images of American Indians.**

Most Americans don't consciously think about the historic and contemporary images they encounter. Nevertheless, these images manipulate our feelings about and even our remembrance of American Indians and our mutual history. Most American Indian images are conceived of and executed by European Americans. Contrast a sculpture of Chief Wahoo (the bucktoothed mascot of the Cleveland Indians), for instance, with a work by Allan Houser or another Native sculptor.

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#### **IV. Conclusion**

As visitors leave, they need to have a place to supply feedback and even "talk" to each other (virtually) about their experience. Also, museums need to showcase Native American newspapers, since most people have never seen one. A lounge space in the café or near the exit might serve both functions and also prompt purchases from the café. Equip it with large blank "scrapbooks or computers" for comments. Leave Native newspapers, marked not to be taken.

Thank you for your attention. I hope your reading time has been rewarded by a good idea or two – if not mine, then perhaps your own, aroused by something I wrote.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Calvin Martin, ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102. Dorris taught Indian and non-Indian undergraduates for years at Dartmouth.

<sup>2</sup>Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: The New Press, 1995), chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup>John A. Garraty with Aaron Singer and Michael Gallagher, *American History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 3.

<sup>4</sup>Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers* (New York: Fawcett, 1988); Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, eds., *Seeds of Change* (Washington: S.I. Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by James Brooke, "Spirit Lake Tribal Members had a Devil of a Time Redeeming Their Good Name," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 11/20/96.

<sup>6</sup>Loewen, *Lies Across America* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 99-102.