MUSEUMS AS DIASPORA FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

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Introduction:

This afternoon, I want to explore whether Native peoples and their material culture that has been collected by museums for the past five hundred years exist in a diaspora. I see immediately a concern about expanding use of this important concept beyond all utility. There are a couple of issues to which I will limit myself today. First is whether or not what museum workers call ‘material culture’ can legitimately be conceived as worthy of consideration under the rubric of ‘diaspora’. Second is the more easily argued case for museums as diaspora for Native American human remains.

On the surface, it would seem logical that Native peoples and museums naturally would be strong allies because the latter institutions often were created and have continued—in the case of the Logan Museum on campus, for the past 110 years—to collect, preserve, and interpret the culture and heritage of Native groups. Although it is indeed the case that many tribal groups have benefitted in certain respects—for example, Native American artists have used museum collections of Northwest Pacific Coast artifacts quite successfully to help revive traditional artistic designs in both traditional and modern forms for their cultural and economic benefit—many aspects of relations for three of the past four decades had become increasingly strained. The repatriation of some of these artifacts to Native communities is another important benefit to which I will return later.

Although a full discussion of the historical character of these relations in all their ramifications must be left for another day, suffice it to say that, in my view, Native people have been justifiably critical of museums on several grounds. They often have expressed dissatisfaction about the ways they perceive museum holdings—especially sacred materials for example—have been collected, preserved, researched, displayed, and interpreted. Taking these five museum functions in reverse order, museums have been accused of misrepresentation and even racism in their programing efforts. Secondly, museum exhibits are problematic from the Native perspective because of problems such as the culturally improper display of ceremonial objects and human remains. At the Logan Museum, we have accepted into our collection Native American ceremonial tobacco pipes with bowl and stem joined. This is considered to be disrespectful and highly inappropriate. Now we have acquiesced to Native practice.

In terms of the third function, museum researchers in Native culture and history have been tarred with the same brush of censure as anthropologists who have been perceived as
uncaring about Native community sensibilities and for having failed to share the results of their work with the people. Native Americans sometimes find it degrading to be continually treated as a 'subject' of research by and for the sole benefit of others. Fourthly, many Native people believe that museums have not properly cared for their sacred materials. They have fought the inappropriate auction of sacred Iroquois wampum belts and criticize the lack of proper respect for and ritual care of ceremonial masks. Finally and most importantly for today's discussion, the means, motives, and local consequences of museum collecting have been criticized by Native people. Indeed, some critics hold the extreme view that all Native American objects in museums have been obtained illicitly.

I first became aware of these conflicts between Native people and museums early in my museum career. In my review of the literature to the late 1970s, I discovered that, in the face of growing criticism by Native people, museums often tended to minimize and/or ignore these concerns, in part because of the way they were expressed. Native people addressed their concerns to museum administrations in terms that were moral, religious, political, and even emotional in nature. In response, museums tended to answer with legal, academic, professional museological, and scientific arguments including conservation to defend their interests in the materials at stake. Clearly, the two parties were speaking to each other on completely different levels. Little or no effective dialogue occurred. As a result, frustrations and misunderstandings compounded.

From the Native perspective, many of their negative appraisals of museums have been informed and strengthened by the emergence of a post-colonial analysis regarding 'cultural appropriation'. In brief, this idea focuses on the process of making what belongs to one cultural group including artifacts into the property of another group, often at the expense of the original creators. Argument also continues to rage in this and other contexts about the 'right' of one culture to portray another—in effect to engage in what has been called a form of 'cultural ventriloquism' that is no longer acceptable to colonized indigenous peoples around the world. According to Basil Johnson, Ojibwa ethnologist at the Royal Ontario Museum, definition by others is one of the ways powerlessness is experienced by Native peoples in the colonial setting.

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1 Vine Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 98 has stated a Native American perspective that “it is essentially dehumanizing to be a subject of study” by the ubiquitous anthropologist. Cf. Weaver
in which museums developed.\textsuperscript{5}

Because the case for regarding museums as a real and meaningful form of diaspora for Native Americans is most easily made in the issue of human remains I will begin here.

**Native Human Remains in Diaspora:**

Because of the mid- to late-nineteenth century enthusiasms over phrenology and 'anthropometry,' or the early approach to physical anthropology, Native skeletal material attained a significant curiosity and scientific—not to mention economic—value to non-Natives. As a consequence, practitioners in the new discipline of anthropology, the military, and even early tourist travelers, became determined and unscrupulous prospectors for Native American human remains. As one might expect—given the near universal value placed on letting one's dead relatives rest in peace—Native people were strongly opposed to this form of collecting, whether justified as scientific or otherwise.

One of the first recorded thefts of Native human remains was the Spanish navigator Alessandro Malaspina on the California coast in 1791.\textsuperscript{6} Forty years later, during his two year sojourn on the Missouri River 1832-1834, the German Maximilian Prince of Wied reported that he had viewed a burial site and returned under the cover of darkness to take some bones “in the interest of science”.\textsuperscript{7}

In the mid-nineteenth century, Samuel Morton, who is recognized as the 'father of physical anthropology, recruited collectors who simply looted Native American burials and took what they wanted. His research interests centering on relating cranial capacity to intelligence served as one of the justifications for the dispossession of Native American lands. By 1859 the American Surgeon General was asking the United States Army to collect Native American human remains from battlefields. In a telling comparison to the Euro-American horror over the hated practice of 'scalping', Native male, female, and child battle casualties were routinely decapitated for this purpose. These inhumanely plundered human remains were later turned over to the Smithsonian Institution.\textsuperscript{8}

Even the most respected early anthropologists such as Maximilian's compatriot Franz Boas personally engaged in and contracted the deliberate theft of Native human remains despite acknowledgment that it was highly inappropriate and that such digging would be illegal in the


case of non-Native remains. In his fascinating study of the frenzied collecting by museums on the Northwest Pacific coast, Douglas Cole cites the diary of Franz Boas for 6 June 1888 wherein he states that stealing bones from Native graves was “repulsive work” prompting horrid dreams, but that “someone had to do it,” noting too that skeletons were worth money: $5 for a skull and $20 for a complete skeleton.\(^9\) There was an active “phrenological market” at the time that was being served by private entrepreneurs and American government officials.\(^10\) Many of Boas’ hundreds of plundered specimens were purchased by museums.

Understandably, Native people were incensed at this nefarious practice as were missionaries and other supporters. Reverend J. H. Jackson wrote in 1897 that almost every Haida grave in the region of Masset on the Queen Charlotte Islands had been rifled and the coffin boxes strewn about by Americans collecting for the Field Museum in Chicago.\(^11\)

Native people were rarely—saving collusion with the Native collectors hired by museums—consulted about the removal of human remains. In effect then, the vast majority of skeletal material that has found its way into museum collections before the turn of the century was in fact stolen\(^12\) and spirited away from Native communities into what can easily be seen as forced exile. [Comment: I do not use the term stolen ‘property’ because human remains cannot be considered to be ‘property.’] Scientific archaeological excavation during this period was given a much lower priority by museums because ‘salvage ethnology’ was a priority since Native cultures were perceived as dying out. The remains preserved in archaeological sites could wait (Cole 1985). Although the Antiquities Act of 1906 and subsequent historic preservation legislation purported to protect Native grave sites just as it did Euro-American cemeteries located on public lands, they made no provision for the need to consult Native people, to obtain their approval before removing the human remains of their ancestors, nor to share the results gained from the scientific studies.\(^13\)

Circumventing Native and legal concerns continued well into the twentieth century and grave robbing continues today.\(^14\)

It is estimated now that as many as 100,000 individual human remains exist in museum collections in the United States alone.\(^15\) In this respect then, the remains of Native American individuals and groups that were dishonorably and secretively removed from sacred ground in their homelands to repositories all over the world must undoubtedly be considered a diaspora. This is surely the case in the Native perspective as in the formal definition of the term.

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\(^9\) Cole, \textit{op cit.} pp. 119, 120
\(^10\) Cole, \textit{op cit.}, pp. 219, 308.
\(^12\) Cole, \textit{op cit.} p. 175 \textit{passim}.
\(^13\) Monroe \textit{op cit.}, p. 394.
\(^15\) Monroe \textit{op cit.}, p. 399.
As one might imagine, the despicable and uncaring despoliation of Native graves on such a massive scale has been an extremely painful experience for many Native individuals and tribes. Beliefs surrounding the dead and the character and number of associated souls vary, however. The world view of many tribal groups holds that the dead should not be disturbed and must be returned to the earth to assure the passage of their spirits to other worlds, but also to safeguard the well-being of the survivors. Among the Menominee for example, the ghost of the departed lingered around the grave indefinitely and had influence on the living. It can also be argued according to that their human rights clearly have been violated. Miriam Clavir (2000:87) reports the contemporary Native view that museum holdings of human remains is equivalent to holding “incarcerated ancestors—imprisoned in a number of cardboard boxes in a sterile cement room.”

A recent article in Museum News that examines the issue upon the tenth anniversary of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) reports that there has been a 'sea change' in relations among Native Americans and museums surrounding this issue.

I will now move to the issue of whether museum collecting of and control over Native artifacts can be thought of as diasporic. This issue will be examined in light of the concepts of inherent in Native American world views, 'cultural appropriation', and rights to cultural and other forms of intellectual property.

Native Artifacts in Diaspora:

In order to examine this question, I first want to ask how many of you have successfully sat through a theater performance where, as I understand it, one is expected to practice what is referred to as the 'willing suspension of disbelief'? If I may call on your indulgence for the next ten minutes, I want to encourage you to temporarily set aside the rational post-modern Western world view and attempt to understand the Native perspective.

Again, specifics may vary among the hundreds of Native cultures throughout North America, but in general Native belief, there is no arbitrary division between animate and inanimate objects. A nearly universal conviction among Native Americans in animism, i.e. the attributing of conscious life to natural objects or phenomena, a practice that eventually gave rise to the notion of a soul. In this perspective, all things—whether they be natural phenomenon,
plants, or rocks—have a spiritual presence. This makes them alive in the same senses as human beings are alive and, in addition, gives them power. According to the Osage anthropologist Francis LaFlesche, “even the commonest sticks and stones have a spiritual essence which must be reverenced as a manifestation of the all-pervading mysterious power that fills the universe.”

In the case of utilitarian artifacts made with their own hands such as a canoe for example, traditional craftsmen among the Eastern Cree inhabiting the Great Whale River region near Hudson Bay, northern Quebec as late as 1978 are reported to believe that the finished vessel is a living creature with a spiritual essence and character. In certain respects, the builder’s own identity is merged with the canoe. Small wonder then that many Native people remain highly ambivalent about museums possessing Native artifacts. Many are torn between joy at seeing the old artifacts made and used by their ancestors at the same time as they express sadness about seeing them held in the seemingly airless spaces behind glass on display or locked away in sterile closed storage conditions.

Much more salient is the case for sacred artifacts. Gros Ventre George P. Horse Capture, curator at the Plains Indian Museum of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, argues that “most traditional materials are to some degree sacred in nature.” He explains this by analogy as a form of dew that forms on everything and tends to accumulate in pools of highly sacred concentration. The Native view emphasizes that sacred objects are 'living' and require air and natural light as any living being. Indeed, some native people believe that no sacred artifact should be held in a museum.

The holding of Native American sacred materials in museums can be seen as the subordination of traditional religious beliefs (and the right to practice them) to the scientific study of the past. In her book Cannibal Culture, Deborah Root has argued that nineteenth century colonists believed that the artifacts of others by definition were for the taking since the 'greater scientific purpose' justified and entitled the Euro-American to appropriation. Here it

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20 Cited in Underhill, op cit., p. 21.
23 Clavir, op cit., pp. 60, 94.
24 Clavir, op cit., p. 90. It should be noted here that some sacred materials have been given to museums by Native people for the very reason that they have so much power that contemporary Native generations lack the proper knowledge and/or willingness to bear responsibility for these objects. Museums have also been used as safe repositories for sacred items. Cf. Jordan Paper, Offering Smoke: The Sacred Pipe and Native American Religion (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1988), p. 104; Cole op cit., p. 278; Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature Curator of Ethnology, Katherine Pettipas, Presentation to the Workshop “Museums, Heritage and First Peoples - An Ongoing Dialogue - What Next?” Canadian Museums Association Annual Conference, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (6 May 2003).
25 Deborah Root, Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of
should be noted that William C. Sturtevant has argued that 90% of ethnological artifact in museums have never been studied.²⁶ Leaving aside basic archival function, this reduces the impact of this argument for scientific study. Native organizations also have argued that this places untenable burdens on religious practice and violates the First Amendment to the Constitution.²⁷

Battiste and Henderson (2000:156) argue that significant sacred and other Native American artifacts are indeed scattered all over the world. One scholar, Karen Coody Cooper, who has examined the relations between Native Americans and museums has written about the unsavory means by which much in museum collections was acquired: “The most sensitive visitors can feel when within museum halls the chaos created by past atrocities.”²⁸

Mere transportation of objects away from the Native community is a form of appropriation across space (Thomas 1991:9) that creates a form of exile from the community of origin for artifacts. People have a right, according to the UNESCO Convention of Cultural Property, not to be deprived of their possessions as a basic element of their identity (Coombe 1997:84; Handler 1991:68).

**Diaspora Concepts:**

In summary, I certainly make no claim to an exhaustive study of diaspora, or Native American collections in museums for that matter. I do, however, believe that it is valid and appropriate to consider museums as a real and meaningful form of diaspora for Native peoples. My naïve and incomplete understanding of diaspora includes the following concepts and I will try briefly to recapitulate their connection with the experience of Native peoples. [Note: the author’s specific oral comments on the following points at this presentation relating to the above analysis were not prepared in advance, or recorded at the time.]

**Diaspora Involves:**

A people: a) as souls attached to their bones and b) associated with the artifacts made and used [initiate a form of angst]

expelled from their homeland

dispersal/scattered (as in sowing seeds)

captivity [cf. Babylonian 586 BC]

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minority group in territory of another
beyond homeland
exile
absence of place [i.e. original]
self- or other-imposed
dispersion of the Jews among the gentiles in 8th to 6th century BC
Jews outside the state of Israel
implicit hope for return.

By Paul C. Thistle
Curator of Exhibits & Adjunct Assistant Professor of Museum Studies
Logan Museum of Anthropology
Beloit College
Beloit, WI, USA