The Depiction of Native American Stereotypes in Museums:  
A Comparison Between Non-Tribally Run Museums and 
Tribally Run Museums

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Abstract

From the earliest days of the republic, Native peoples in the United States have been subjected to an array of stereotypes, all of which reduce the indigenous communities to fictitious caricatures devoid of cultural reality. Although these images are found primarily in popular, mainstream media, such as films and books, they are not absent from educational institutions, like museums. Based on field data collected at various museums, this study considers differences in the presentation of Native Americans in non-tribally run museums, including the Field Museum, and tribally run museums, such as the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. After observing these museums, the exhibitions revealed differences in the presentation of Native Americans ranging from static, primitive, and vanishing depictions to messages of survival. However, there are several factors, beyond the individuals who organize the museum, that shape the types of portrayals being presented, such as age and permanence of exhibits.
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It is July. The clouds are sparsely covering the light blue sky. Although it is the middle of summer in the Windy City, there are quite a large number of guests visiting the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois on this overcast day, mostly school groups with children. As I meander my way through the Native American exhibitions located on the first level of the world-renowned museum, I finally arrive at the “Hall of Native North Americans.” Upon entering this space, I am immediately stunned by what I see. There is a display case, in the middle of the passageway, highlighting indigenous clothing. However, instead of placing the articles of clothing on mannequins that depict realistic representations of Native peoples, with facial features, these mannequins are faceless and have no hands. These mannequins are faceless in the sense that the “face” is not a face at all, but rather merely a circular shaped object that is supposed to be a head. This “face” has no eyes, ears, nose, mouth, imperfections, such as wrinkles, or blemishes, such as discoloration in the skin. Instead, the circular “face” is covered in a cloth-like material that leaves the mannequins appearing as if they have no facial features. Furthermore, these faceless mannequins also lack fingers. In the place of five separate fingers with nails and knuckles, there is a shape that appears to look like a mitten because of the fact that there is no separation for fingers.

The more time I spent examining these faceless and handless mannequins, the more troubling I found them. If these mannequins are supposed to illustrate the clothing real indigenous peoples wear, why are they being presented in such an impersonal manner, being displayed on mannequins that do not have faces or hands? Perhaps, the answer to this question rests in the fact that the main focus of the display case was the actual clothing items themselves. However, even if this were the intention of the museum, would adding eyes, ears, a nose, a mouth and fingers to the mitten-like hands really take away from that? Instead, by displaying Native
peoples, specifically the mannequins as faceless, it not only makes it extremely difficult for visitors, specifically non-indigenous visitors, to relate to the groups being presented because of their faceless nature, which causes them to appear as if they are non-human, but it may also contribute to stereotypical visions of indigenous cultures as being different, as the “Other,” groups of peoples whose cultures are dissimilar to one’s own. This is one of the countless challenges museums that display indigenous cultures face, namely how to present indigenous communities in a way that does not perpetuate stereotypes. Museums, as educational institutions, have the potential to dispel Native American stereotypes, but, as illustrated in this example, struggle to do this.

Stereotypes often distort the way in which one views a group of individuals. A stereotype can be defined as “an image containing distorted or erroneous information” (Burgess 1974:167). This image has often been altered from the truth and is the “product of oversimplification, exaggeration, or generalization,” which is typically learned from popular culture, such as films and books, or from ideas spread from person to person through verbal conversations (Burgess 1974:167; Fleming 2007:57). In this “oversimplification,” often times, groups of people are divided into two contrasting categories, “‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Hawkins 2005:51). This begs the question, why do stereotypes exist?

Human beings have a tendency to classify all aspects of life. However, Mary Douglas, a twentieth century anthropologist, argues that although there is an inherent need for classification, no system of classification is perfect, due to the outstanding amount of diversity that exists in the world (Moore 2012:247, 256, 257). Despite these imperfections, classification systems are necessary for human cognition. But, when combined with unequal access to power and wealth, such systems can form stereotypes.
Many ethnic groups experience the effects of stereotyping, including Native Americans, a term that denotes a pan-ethnic category. A pan-ethnic category places a diverse set of cultures or peoples under one specific term, for example Native Americans (Krystal 2012:15). This categorical term puts multiple groups of peoples who live in several “geographic areas” under one all-encompassing term due to a “general shared history or culture” amongst the various groups of peoples classified under the term (Krystal 2012:15). Although it may be useful and important to classify groups of peoples into one all-encompassing term, there are also issues with this. Due to the fact that the groups categorized under the term are all so diverse, this categorization may lead to “overgeneralization” and “inaccuracy” when trying to define all of the peoples defined by the pan-ethnic category (Krystal 2012:16). In this sense, pan-ethnic categories may be too broad and may in fact contribute to the existence of stereotypes (Krystal 2012:16).

Native peoples have been classified based on the opinions of non-indigenous outsiders, opinions that are crafted upon whether the indigenous individuals fit into these outsiders’ ideas of what a culture should embody. The creation of Native American stereotypes has deeply impacted non-indigenous peoples’ perception of Indian nations. Since the first Europeans set foot on indigenous land and the colonization process began in the Americas, Native peoples have been represented in stereotypical ways, which over the course of time have changed (Barker and Dumont 2006:118). Unfortunately, the misrepresentations, arising during the early colonial period, continue to exist in the twenty-first century, in even the most academic museums.

Based on field data collected at various museums, this study considers differences in the presentation of Native Americans in non-tribally run museums, including the Field Museum, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, and the Milwaukee Public Museum, as well as tribally

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1 A discussion of the evolving outlook of indigenous cultures from an anthropological perspective follows in a discussion about twentieth century anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.
run museums, such as the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and the Oneida Nation Museum. After examining these museums, including the organization of the exhibitions, the text accompanying the objects within the museums, and the artifacts themselves, the exhibitions revealed differences in the presentation of Native Americans ranging from overly generalized static, primitive, and vanishing depictions to messages of survival and individual and community diversity. However, there are several factors, beyond the people who organize the exhibitions, that shape the types of portrayals being presented, such as intended audience, age and permanence of exhibits.

Methodology is a fundamental aspect of any research, which for this project included not only subjective observations as a patron of the museums myself, but also objective data points based in a tradition of critiquing museums, such as Serena Nanda’s work. In Nanda’s text, titled “Using a Museum as a Resource for Ethnographic Research,” the author lists a variety of ways ethnographic researchers, such as myself, can analyze a museum from an objective perspective. For example, text labels, which are used to describe artifacts, are a valuable resource (Nanda 2007:75). “Descriptive labels,” as Nanda (2007:75) refers to them, provide researchers with “cultural information” about the culture from whom the object came, such as the function of the object as well as its use within its community. The analysis of text labels, specifically the examination of the information present or missing from a text label, is one of the primary objective methods I utilized during my visitations of the museums (Nanda 2007:79). Missing “cultural context” information, the information that supplies visitors with knowledge about the object, is imperative to document, according to Nanda (2007:79). Nanda argues that the lack of this information forms a disconnection between the artifact and the patron. This disconnect arises because the visitor does not receive enough information about the object to truly understand its
significance to the community from whom it came (Nanda 2007:79). Another technique researcher’s can exercise while analyzing museums, based on Nanda’s (2007:76) suggestions, involves the observation of how museums depict cultures, whether it be in “simpler chronological and technological” ways or in “complex and dynamic ways.” Through an awareness of these differences, researchers have the opportunity to better comprehend how an exhibit is presenting a culture. In this discussion, Nanda (2007:76) also references how the age of an exhibit may impact its depiction of cultures, noting that “earlier museum exhibits,” due to the nature of the discipline of cultural anthropology at the time, tend to display cultures in a more simplistic manner than contemporary exhibits.

As I visited each of the museums, I relied on Nanda’s scholarship on ethnographic methods for analyzing a museum, primarily through structured observations, which included a checklist of information to gather. My checklist, inspired by Nanda’s conversation about cultural information, the complexity of topics explored, and age of exhibitions, included a variety of questions I examined in each exhibition. Some of the questions included: Does the museum include large, over-arching generalizations? Does the museum present Native American cultures as vanishing, primitive, timeless or static? When was the exhibit created? Does the museum incorporate Native voices? The structured observations, the checklist, enabled me to examine the museum exhibits from a more objective standpoint, relying specifically on whether these aspects existed in the museum or not. My methodology also incorporated participant observations. I was a participant as a museum visitor. The participant observations were more subjective because I relied on my own interpretation of the exhibits particularly by examining the way in which the Native American exhibitions were organized, including what information was present, what information was missing, how the exhibitions were organized, the types of artifacts present, and
the descriptions provided about the objects. The presence of subjectivity in scholarly research can be problematic because the researcher is integrating his or her own biases into the research. Having said this, however, the structured observations help eliminate some of the potential challenges and issues that arise with the inclusion of subjective research methods. In addition to the structured and participant observations, I also interviewed museum staff, including Dr. Alaka Wali, the curator of North American Anthropology at the Field Museum.

*The “White Man’s Indian”*

Since the arrival of Europeans to North America, Native American stereotypes have existed. There have been countless types of stereotypes: the beastly savage, the noble savage, the trickster, the environmentalist, the princess, the squaw, the perfect mascot and advertising image, the gambler, and the alcoholic (Fleming 2007:52-57; Merskin 2001:163). In an effort to delve deeper into a limited number of stereotypical images, this analysis primarily examines the presentation of Native Americans as the “‘White Man’s Indian,’” namely a group of people who, through broad over generalizations and a lack of cultural context, are essentially viewed as an identical, vanishing group whose culture is static, timeless, and primitive to that of its non-Native, Euro-American counter culture (Fair 2000:204). This belief in the racial superiority of European colonists, and later white, American citizens, is what later critics of nineteenth century scholars termed as Social Darwinism, a concept that assumes some societies “were more evolved than others”2 (Hoefferle 2011:66). Indigenous societies, colonists believed, lacked the complexities of a civilized community. These images of Native Americans are “historically

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2 In 1877, Lewis Henry Morgan, an anthropologist, published a work titled *Ancient Society: Or Reaches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization*, which classified various stages of society. Based on Morgan’s classification system, beginning with lower savagery and progressing all the way to civilization, Native American communities resided somewhere between “upper savagery, lower barbarianism, or . . . middle barbarianism” (Adams 1995:14). Native Americans fell within these categories for a number of reasons, namely because of their subsistence methods, their seemingly lack of technological advancement, and their ideologies, such as their religious beliefs (Adams 1995:6, 14).
constructed,” resulting from the continued proliferation of stereotypical beliefs and perceptions about Native peoples, by a non-indigenous, white, Anglo society, over an extended period of time (Merskin 2001:163). The “White Man’s Indian” typically depicts Native Americans as “noble savages, . . . traditional, . . . and timeless,” essentially “frozen in the past” (Büken 2002:46; Fair 2000:204). Overtime, these characteristics used to describe Native peoples became so embedded in non-indigenous individuals’ understanding of Native American cultures that white society began to view these images as “authentic,” a classification that often fails to acknowledge the transformations all cultures make (Fair 2000:205; Krystal 2012:32).

During the late nineteenth century, anthropologists and other scholars believed that, due to the forced relocation of Native peoples onto reservations, traditional Native American cultures were disappearing, thus contributing to origin of the “vanishing Indian” myth (Mithlo 2004:748). Therefore, in an effort to preserve the culture of this vanishing group of people, scholars started collecting as many Native American objects as they could and placed them in museums (Mithlo 2004:748). This preservation attempt to save the cultural artifacts of a disappearing culture is sometimes referred to as “salvage anthropology” (Mithlo 2004:748). For example, between the years of 1879 and 1885, around 12,609 artifacts were removed from the Zuni Pueblo community of less than 2,000 people to be relocated to the Smithsonian Institute (Mithlo 2004:748-749). In fact, even the man credited as the “‘Father of American Anthropology,’” Franz Boas, collected a wide range of objects, such as human remains, from Native American communities during the late nineteenth century (Mithlo 2004:749).

**Changing Notions of Change**

Despite the common belief held by a number of intellectuals during the nineteenth century, including Franz Boas, Native American cultures were not on the verge of disappearance.
Instead, they were on the threshold of cultural change, one of the defining characteristics of culture, which is often disregarded in popular imagination regarding indigenous communities. Since the arrival of Europeans, indigenous communities have had to adapt to their fluctuating political environments in order to survive. One of the ways in which indigenous communities have accomplished this is through the incorporation of new technologies into their traditional ways of life. For example, the Cherokee, after European colonists introduced guns, began to incorporate the new technology into their traditional hunting practices, transforming the practices, but not eliminating them (Duncan and Riggs 2003:18). However, the Cherokee are not alone in this pursuit to incorporate external resources into their everyday affairs. In the twentieth century, the Yupik and Inupiat, also recognized the advantages of “harnessing industrial technologies,” including the use of modern equipment, such as snowmachines, CB radios, and rifles, to complete centuries old tasks like hunting, (Sahlins 1999:vi-vii).

Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist, in his article titled “What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century” (1999:vii) exposes how anthropologists’ understanding of indigenous cultures has changed over time, from Franz Boas and other nineteenth century anthropologists’ belief that indigenous cultures were disappearing to twentieth and twenty-first century ideas about the ever-changing nature and survival of Native communities. In his article, Sahlins delves further into these topics, explaining how the Yupik and Inupiat not only continue to exist, but also continue to be Yupik and Inupiat, despite their inclusion of modern technologies to traditional hunting practices, thereby trying to debunk commonly held beliefs that culture, specifically indigenous cultures, is static, timeless, and unchanging. Sahlins (1999:vii) includes this information to combat the viewpoints of scholars, such as Charles Hughes, who in his 1954 and 1955 ethnographic account of an indigenous
community, the Siberian Yupik of Gambell Village on St. Lawrence Island, concluded that the Eskimo community was disappearing because, in his opinion, “the time ha[d] passed . . . when entire groups or communities of Eskimo c[ould] successfully relate to the mainland economy and social structure.” However, preconceived notions that cultures are timeless and unchanging blinded Hughes’ observation. Hughes failed to recognize that the community he was studying was not static, but constantly underwent change, such as by incorporating modern technology into their daily lives, due to the “‘benefits’” such technology could bring to the community’s way of living (Sahlins 1999:viii).

In his article, Sahlins (1999:xi) records a quote by Ralph Linton. Linton (2002[1937]:1-3), in his article “One Hundred Percent American,” stresses that every culture adopts some aspect of their culture from another society, even American culture. Linton (2002[1937]:2) provides an example of a “typical” American’s morning routine, professing how each part of this routine is connected to a product or process developed from another culture. Take, for example, one’s morning reading of the newspaper. Linton (2002[1937]:3) clarifies how the newspaper is “imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites by a process invented in Germany upon a material invented in China.” Linton’s argument centers on the notion that cultures borrow “foreign” technologies and practices from one another. However, the utilization of these objects and ideas does not make one any less a part of his or her culture, American for example, just as a member of the Yupik community driving a snowmachine to expedite the hunting process does not make that individual any less Native American (Sahlins 1999:xi). This argument undermines the assumption that cultures exist in a vacuum, uninfluenced by other cultures.

In addition to discrediting the idea that cultures are static, in his text, Sahlins also discusses the misconception that cultures disappear, in a section titled “Culture is Not
Disappearing.” In this section of the article, Sahlins (1999:xx) explores how culture does not disappear, even if there may have been an “overall decrease of cultural diversity in the past five centuries.” Sahlins (1999:xxi) notes that cultures do not disappear, but rather they transform in “ways [anthropologists] had never imagined.” Sahlins’ work responds directly to late nineteenth century anthropological theories, such as the theory held by anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan about “unilineal cultural evolution,” the assumption that cultures underwent a number of progressive transformations from a primitive state of savagery to the “status of civilization” (Moore: 2009:14; Morgan 2009[1877]:21) Morgan believed that there were specific stages a culture went through in order to become a civilized society, which occurred in a unilineal fashion. For example, Morgan postulated that a culture progressed from one status to the next in almost a check-list manner, advancing from the lower, middle, and upper statuses of savagery to the lower, middle, and upper statuses of barbarism to civilization (Morgan 2009[1877]:21).

However, Sahlins argues that change does not have an order. According to Sahlins’ argument, there is no such thing as “unilineal cultural evolution,” no forward or backward progression, only change (Sahlins: 1999:xx-xxi). Sahlins’ article breaks away from the nineteenth century anthropological assumption that when “traditional societies change they become inauthentic, merely Western-contaminated vestiges of what they once were” (Moore 2012:341). Instead, Sahlins professes a new anthropological understanding of indigenous communities that stresses the importance in recognizing the ever-changing nature of culture and its ability and aptitude to change, which is always occurring because no culture is static.

The Continued Existence of Native American Stereotypes

Although there are a multitude of possible reasons accounting for the existence of Native American stereotypes, despite Sahlins’ argument for a different approach for analyzing cultures,
perhaps one of the most compelling reasons is the minuscule amount of information the majority of mainstream, non-indigenous people know about the Indigenous peoples of North America (Lonetree 2006:640-641). There appears to be a lack of education provided to the American public, one problem being the minute amount of information on Native American cultures addressed in schools. American textbooks and teachers seem to “ignore the complex culture[s] of Native Americans, and refrain from teaching students about current issues and experiences,” many times encouraging students to “play Indian” (Hawkins 2005:53). One term that is frequently exercised is the “ignorance” the non-indigenous community has regarding Native American cultures (Lonetree 2006:641). The curriculum students encounter in school, from Kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12), may provide some insight into the supposed “ignorance” the non-indigenous community has towards indigenous cultures and illustrate how the education does little to challenge Native American stereotypes. Seeing as I visited museums in Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, I have examined the state goals and standards for students in grades K-12 in an effort to uncover how much background information students receive about Native cultures during their K-12 educational careers, analyzing how much exposure students get to Native communities and what they are expected to know.

In Illinois, the location of the Field Museum and the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, there are newly adopted common core standards for students in Social Science. One of the goals is Goal 16, which focuses on history. In Goal 16, students, in the category labeled “Early Elementary: 16.C.1a (US),” are supposed to “describe how Native American people in Illinois engaged in economic activities with other tribes and traders in the region prior to the Black Hawk War” (Illinois State Board of Education – Goal 16). Furthermore, in the “Late Elementary: 16.E.2a (W)” category, students must “describe how people in hunting and
gathering and early pastoral societies adapted to their respective environments” (Illinois State Board of Education – Goal 16). However, this description does not specifically list that the hunting and gathering and pastoral societies must be North American societies. Additionally, because there is a “(W)” in the description, it is plausible that the societies described must come from around the world instead of the United States since the “(US)” is not used. Illinois state Goal 18 for Social Science emphasizes social systems. In the first part of the goal, “A,” students, from early elementary to late high school, are expected to “compare characteristics of culture as reflective in language, literature, the arts, traditions and institutions” (Illinois State Board of Education – Goal 18). Once again, this does not directly list the required use of indigenous nations to fulfill this aim. Although these Social Science goals for the state of Illinois include topics where teachers who were educated and interested in indigenous communities could interject discussion of Native Americans, the only state requirement for directly learning about indigenous peoples appears to be at the early elementary level, where the concentration is really placed on economic activities, not culture. Turning to North Carolina, the location of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, there is a very different approach to teaching students about Native cultures.

North Carolina’s education standards for Social Studies appear to emphasize the discussion of Native American topics from an early age. In fourth grade, students are expected to “summarize the change in cultures, everyday life and status of indigenous American Indian groups in North Carolina before and after European exploration” (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: Grades 3-5 2010:7). This is encouraging because it directly addresses indigenous communities in its description. Once again, in fifth grade, North Carolina requires students to look directly at indigenous communities, namely by “evaluat[ing] the relationships
between European explorers (French, Spanish and English) and American Indian groups, based on accuracy of historical information (beliefs, fears and leadership)” (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: Grades 3-5 2010:13). Again, in eighth grade, students learn about Native Americans, specifically their contributions to the “development of North Carolina and the United States” (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: Grade 8 2012:7). In high school, students must pass American History I – The Founding Principles. In this course, students have the possibility to learn about Native Americans in a number of ways: “the roles of various racial and ethnic groups in settlement and expansion through Reconstruction and the consequences for those groups” and the “voluntary and involuntary immigration trends through Reconstruction in terms of causes, regions of origin and destination, cultural contributions, and public and governmental response,” to name a few (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: American History I 2010:7). In addition to this, there is even a Social Studies elective course called “American Indian Studies,” which introduces “students to the exploration of the rich and diverse history and culture of American Indian societies” (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: American Indian Studies 2013:1). The course utilizes primary sources and covers topics ranging from “tribal sovereignty” to change and continuity to economic struggles to the “cultural identity” of Native Americans (Public Schools of North Carolina – Social Studies: American Indian Studies 2013:2, 1-6). However, although this course is available, it is an elective, which means that students are not required to take it to graduate from high school. Therefore, a number of students may only receive a small amount of information on Native American topics during the required course, American History I – The Founding Principles. However, the inclusion of the elective course on Native Americans is a wonderful addition to the state’s elective choices.
The state requirements for Wisconsin, the location of the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Oneida Nation Museum, are similar to the standards of North Carolina, placing a larger emphasis on the study of indigenous cultures than Illinois. Wisconsin, at the end of grades four, eight, and twelve, has Social Studies standards students should have obtained, one of which includes an understanding of the indigenous communities in Wisconsin. By the end of grade four, students should be able to “explain the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Social Studies Standard B – Grade 4). By the end of grade eight, it is a student’s responsibility to “summarize major issues associated with the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Social Studies Standard B – Grade 8). By the time students graduate from high school, they should be able to “analyze the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Social Studies Standard B – Grade 12). Similarly to North Carolina and Illinois, Wisconsin’s topics on Native American history tend to focus on indigenous communities within the state. However, Wisconsin is the only state, of the three, to really emphasize indigenous culture as a key component of the required curriculum. In North Carolina, culture seemed to only be discussed in the elective course. Therefore, students in Wisconsin are learning about different aspects of indigenous communities than students in either Illinois or North Carolina, whose education may focus on Native Americans in relation to topics in U.S. history, rather than on topics directly pertaining to the indigenous communities themselves. Although Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin all seem to require students to learn at least one piece of information about indigenous communities, some more than others, there is still an
inadequate amount of information provided about Native cultures, which may in fact contribute to the “ignorance” many non-indigenous individuals have regarding Native cultures.

Based on the small amount of information about Native American topics provided in Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin school systems, it could be argued that many non-indigenous people are unaware, due to their academic backgrounds, not only of the “policies and practices that led to [the] genocide [of Indigenous peoples] in the Americas,” but also of the “secret knowledge” that these peoples continue to exist in contemporary society (Lonetree 2006:641; Lujan 2005:513). This lack of information, in combination with the belief that Native Americans receive “special privileges,” such as free education and medical care, that other individuals do not receive, continues to fuel negative and stereotypical images of Native peoples in the twenty-first century (Fleming 2007:52-54). However, continuing with the notion of an uninformed public, many of these non-indigenous people, frustrated by the “special privileges” Native Americans receive, do not know the entire story as to why these peoples might receive such benefits. For example, someone who is unfamiliar with the relationship between the federal government and a Native community may incorrectly label an “obligation” of a treaty, such as education or health care benefits in exchange for land, as a special privilege (Fleming 2007:53-54). Although these assumptions would be false, the negative opinions associated with them continue to exist because of a lack of education about Native Americans in general, as well as minimal knowledge about the agreements between Native nations and the federal government. Additionally, it may be easier to live with the history, specifically the grim treatment of indigenous peoples by the United States, if one is convinced that Native peoples are afforded all sorts of benefits and advantages. It seems to mask ongoing poverty and marginalization of indigenous peoples. These stereotypes become popular because they justify and explain colonial
expansion. They persist because they continue to provide a satisfying story about the past, but also because the education system does little to challenge them, as the current curriculums within the states of Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin demonstrate. As the education system in America fails to really challenge the erroneous stereotypes associated with Native Americans, stereotypical images of Native cultures as static, primitive, and vanishing continue to exist in the twenty-first century not only in schools, but in mainstream culture, including Hollywood films, books, toys, children’s games, and advertising brands, and within other educational institutions, such as museums (Merskin 2001:161, 163).

The Evolution of Native American Exhibits in Non-Tribally Run Museums

Museums are powerful institutions. They not only have the ability to reveal the cultural values of a community, but they also have the capability to “create and perpetuate specific ideologies and historical memories” (Carpio 2006:620; Nanda 2007:79). As institutions of learning, museums have a responsibility to educate the public, which typically includes the “‘mainstream or non-Aboriginal segments of society’” (Mithlo 2004:758). However, this obligation is not as easy as it may appear. Although museums have a variety of resources at their disposal to ensure that the messages they present are factual, designing an exhibit that is completely objective is nearly impossible. Therefore, patrons are visiting exhibits whose designs are directly influenced by the deliberate decisions of the people creating them. Exhibition designers determine the orientation of the exhibit, what artifacts to display, and what information to write on the text labels. In addition to the people designing the exhibit, there are other factors that influence how an exhibit is created, including the intended audience, the time period in which the exhibit was created, and the permanence of the exhibit, to name a few major contributors.
As the myth that Native Americans, among other cultures around the world, were vanishing characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, museums became the institutions responsible for “preserv[ing]” these dying cultures (Collier 2003:212; Hoerig 2010:63; Nanda 2007:77). Therefore, it was during this time period that a number of Native American exhibitions surfaced all over the United States. Typically, the exhibits tended to focus more attention on the artifacts than on the actual people from whom the objects came (Collier 2003:212; Lonetree 2006:632). Moreover, these early Native American exhibitions enhanced the image of Native peoples as static, vanishing, and primitive. The original display of Native American ancestral remains, prior to the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which aimed to protect Native American burial sites and return sacred objects and remains to the proper indigenous community, highlighted the non-indigenous belief in the disappearance of Native Americans (Lonetree 2006:633; Simpson 1994:29). Additionally, the perception that Native Americans were primitive and “barbaric” people was underscored through the deliberate exclusion of cultural context from the exhibits (Collier 2003:212; Nanda 2007:79). Cultural context includes information about the importance of an object to the individual or group of people who created it, the function of the object within the community, the meaning behind any iconographic images or specific use of material or color scheme, and the meaning the object held for those who used it (Nanda 2007:79). Without the inclusion of this information, patrons are not provided with the ability to understand the object from the perspective of the culture to which it belonged. Instead, visitors are simply left to view the object from the perspective of their own culture, failing to gain a deeper comprehension of the culture under study in the exhibit. Additionally, this lack of cultural context fails to include the voices of those whose objects are
on display, thereby completely undermining the goal of educating the public about another culture (Nanda 2007:79).

However, museums grapple with the appropriate amount of information to provide on text labels. It is nearly impossible to tell the entire story of a group of people in a museum devoted solely to those people, let alone in an exhibit that is merely part of a larger museum that concentrates on a dozen of peoples throughout the exhibit space. Larger museums, that have multiple exhibits on a plethora of topics, such as the Field Museum, do not always have the privilege to go into great depth, like including cultural context, because the exhibits would become too lengthy, dissuading patrons from viewing the exhibits because of the daunting amount of text next to each artifact (Hoerig 2010:66). Although this explanation makes sense, it still does not excuse a lack of cultural context. For example, by forgoing the cultural context of an object, a museum may alter the original meaning of an object for the specific community that created it (Nanda 2007:74). Additionally, without cultural context, museums leave room for “misappropriated or misunderstood” references that can only further inaccurate depictions of Native communities (Barker and Dumont 2006:117). In this sense, museum exhibits are “selective” in both what artifacts are displayed and what information is shared about those specific artifacts (Nanda 2007:75).

Just as museum exhibits consciously decide what information to include and omit, they also have control over the organizational set-up of Native American exhibits. One of the most popular organizational set-ups, during the rise of Native American exhibits in the early twentieth century, “divid[ed]” the Native communities into “cultural groups,” namely by region (Lonetree 2006:633). The division of indigenous communities by region insinuated, and arguably, for those museums who continue to organize their Native American exhibits in the manner, continue to
insinuate, to visitors, that “all tribes are the same, or at least the same within one particular region,” an inaccurate suggestion (Lonetree 2006:633). Although the goal of creating Native American exhibits in the early twentieth century may have been to preserve Native American cultures, more often than not, either through a lack of cultural information or the separation of indigenous communities by region, the exhibits only further enhanced stereotypical images of Native nations.³

However, in the 1980s, museums started to receive criticism for their display of indigenous cultures (Collier 2003:212-213; Mithlo 2004:744; Nanda 2007:77). During the late 1960s and 1970s, a crusade for self-advocacy, called the American Indian Movement, started to gain momentum as Native peoples throughout the United States joined together to vocalize their frustrations with the way in which they had been treated within American society. Activists involved in this movement attempted to address the discrimination of the past all the while hoping to gain control of their own representation (Simpson 1994:25). The acknowledgement of this criticism forced museums to begin to reinterpret Native American cultures within their exhibitions, not as cultures of the distant past, but as a group of people who not only continued to exist, but could also be found as members of an urban society (Collier 2003:213). As educational tools, mainstream museums have been critical in “defining the visibility of Indigenous peoples and cultures in American historical memory by creating exhibits of Indigenous peoples based on perceptions and views that benefit and justify American colonialism” (Carpio 2006:620).

Therefore, due to this large connection to colonialism, museums have often, in the past and arguably in the present as well, been “painful” places for Native Americans (Lonetree 2006:632). Having acknowledged this pain and the criticism of indigenous activists in the 1970s and 1980s,

³ Furthermore, these exhibitions also preserved the field of anthropology, specifically the common scholarly beliefs at the time period.
there has been a “shift” in the way in which non-tribally run museums approach Native American exhibitions, changing, in some regards, the display of Native American stereotypes (Lonetree 2006:632). One museum that responded to the indigenous criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, altering its approach to the presentation of Native nations within museums, was the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), opened in 2004 in Washington, D.C. (Hoerig 2010:66; Lonetree 2006:638).

From the onset of its construction, the NMAI aimed to approach the exhibits within the museum from a fairly new perspective, one that was a “community-based approach” (Lonetree 2006:635). In this approach, also referred to as a type of co-collaboration, non-indigenous and indigenous parties work together in cooperation to help create the exhibitions (Lonetree 2006:635, 638; Schultz 2011:1). However, the NMAI was not the first to attempt such a partnership. Collaborative approaches that include the voices of indigenous peoples in the decision-making process began in the “late 1980s and early 1990s” (Schultz 2011:1). This fairly new technique can be viewed as an effort to help Native communities regain some authority in the way in which they are presented to mainstream, non-indigenous society (Schultz 2011:2). Although such an approach is a great improvement from the twentieth century exhibits, integrating the voices of Native individuals from a variety of nations, twenty-four indigenous communities total, the exhibits created under this collaborative effort are not devoid of their fair share of complications and issues, one of which includes the primary audience of the museum, non-indigenous visitors (Hoerig 2010:66; Lonetree 2006:636). Therefore, although the museum may reflect a Native perspective to some extent, the NMAI must also “appeal” to its non-indigenous visitors, in the way it markets itself, the way it educates its audience, and the design of the space (Hoerig 2010:66). This has caused some, such as scholar, Amy Lonetree (Ho-
Chunk), to critique the museum, asserting that the museum failed to include vital pieces of information about indigenous cultures (Lonetree 2006:636, 641).

One of Lonetree’s (2006:636) leading complaints with the NMAI is its “failure to discuss the colonization process in a clear and coherent manner.” Lonetree argues (2006:637-638, 643) that the museum does not adequately discuss the unfathomable treatment of Native Americans throughout the history of the United States, which is imperative to the story of Native American survival, a central theme of the museum that undermines the “vanishing Indian” myth. However, in order for the primarily non-indigenous audience to truly comprehend the great suffering and perseverance Native peoples have endured, the “painful stories of colonization” and assimilation must be included to educate the mainstream American public about America’s complex past (Lonetree 2006:639, 642). This failure, on the part of the NMAI, to educate the museum’s audience on the relationship between the United States and Native Americans over the course of history, is, according to Lonetree, (2006:632) a “missed opportunit[y].” Lonetree is not alone in this opinion of the NMAI, James Lujan, a Native American (Taos Pueblo) filmmaker and writer, (2005:510) also critiqued the museum.

Lujan, after visiting the NMAI, found many issues with the information present, or perhaps more accurately the information missing. Lujan (2005:516), in addition to Lonetree, also observed the insufficient amount of information on colonization, agreeing that in order to understand the resiliency of Native American cultures, patrons must be exposed to the whole story of Native American history, which includes the colonization narrative. Lujan calls this missing element “adversity,” without which he claims the museum fails to include crucial “historical context” information (Lujan 2005:516). In this sense, Lujan (2005:513) believes that the NMAI “emphasizes the positive [and] glosses over the negative,” perhaps in an attempt not
to disrupt non-indigenous visitors’ understanding of American history. In addition to this critique, after visiting the museum, Lujan (2005:513) expressed his disappointment with the museum, noting that the museum was not built for a Native audience or for those who are familiar with Native American history. But rather, the museum was designed “for those who don’t know,” particularly about the existence of Native peoples in the twenty-first century. As a Native American himself, Lujan (2005:513) stated that he is already aware that Native Americans exist and did not need a national museum to tell him that. However, according to his article, titled “A Museum of the Indian, Not for the Indian,” Lujan asserts that such a central message could only be intended for those individuals who are unaware of this existence. In fact, Lujan (2005:513, 516) even goes so far as to comment that he “hope[s]” that the patrons who do not know this obvious fact learn something from the museum because, as a Native American, he did not learn, prompting him to declare that even though the NMAI is about indigenous people and created with the help of Native Americans, the NMAI is “not necessarily a museum for the Indian.” It is important to note that while the NMAI consulted many Native voices during the creation of the museum, not every exhibit was co-curated. Thus, some exhibits reflect the interpretations of Native American cultures by non-indigenous curators (Lonetree 2006:638). Nevertheless, a number of the exhibits were co-curated. This collaboration effort does not exist in the NMAI alone, there are a number of museums throughout the United States who have also

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4 It is important to note that I did not visit the NMAI. Therefore, I cannot speak as thoroughly about the presentation of stereotypes within the museum, such as the “White Man’s Indian,” because I did not complete my structured and participant observations there. I plan to visit the NMAI one day to carry out these observations. In the meantime, however, I relied on the abundant amount of scholarship that has been completed on the NMAI. The NMAI has been subjected to scholarship and press more than any of the other museums visited. Therefore, there has been more examination of the space as a whole than the museums I personally examined. As for the indigenous control compared to the non-indigenous control, some research stated that although a number of exhibits were co-collaborated, not every single exhibit was, which can be problematic for two reasons (Lonetree 2006:638). First, Native peoples’ voices are not being reflected in every exhibit. Second, if the designer or contributor to the completion of the exhibit is not clear to the audience, then this may be misleading, causing some visitors to question which exhibits were created with the incorporation of an indigenous voice.
implemented this technique, such as the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, and the Field Museum in Chicago (Hoerig 2010:65-66). However, unlike the NMAI, some museums, such as the Field Museum, did not implement these newer techniques at the conception of the museum, but rather have started to integrate them into preexisting exhibits, “revising as [they] go” (Brady 2008:770).

In the late twentieth century, the first museums began to “transition” away from the traditional method of displaying Native Americans as a vanishing race whose culture needed to be preserved in a timeless manner. The Field Museum, in Chicago, Illinois, joined this group of museums as they embarked on their pursuit to alter the way in which Native nations were depicted in exhibitions (Collier 2003:213). The *Indians Before Columbus* exhibits were among the first to undergo this transformation (Collier 2003:213). In the 1940s and 1950s, the exhibits within this section of the museum did not just show artifacts, but instead used dioramas and paintings as a technique to illustrate to the visitors the way in which Native peoples lived (Collier 2003:213-214). The exhibit is said to have been about “‘real people’” (Collier 2003:214). However, it was not until the 1960s that Native peoples truly began to have a greater influence in the construction of exhibits at the Field Museum, a process that continues into the present. For example, in 1968 the museum worked with the American Indian Center in Chicago to design an exhibit called the *Festival of American Indian Art* (Collier 2003:214). In the twenty-first century, as the Field Museum continues to update preexisting exhibitions, the museum strives to incorporate the stories of indigenous people, an endeavor which can be successfully observed in the newly renovated exhibit, “Ancient Americans,” which “reopened” in March of 2007 (Brady 2008:769). The voices of Native peoples are present throughout the entire exhibit in the form of colored photographs with contemporary Native Americans on them, each citing a quotation from
the individual or group of individuals in the photograph. Although “The Ancient Americas” section reflects a more contemporary approach to the presentation of indigenous cultures within a museum setting, other areas in the museum do not. In fact, the Field Museum addresses this inaccurate depiction of Native American cultures, stating that certain sections, such as the “Hall of Native North Americans,” “do . . . not reflect their current understanding of the appropriate presentation of American Indian culture[s] and people[s]” (Brady 2008:770). Although the Field Museum acknowledges the inaccuracies of some of its exhibits, namely the “Hall of Native North Americans,” misleading depictions of Native American cultures continues to spread faulty images of Native nations, images indigenous individuals aim to control in tribally run museums.

The Growth of Tribally Run Museums

As early as 1826, Native peoples, specifically the Cherokee in Georgia, have desired to create their own museums (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:224). However, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the “modern movement” of constructing tribal museums gained popularity, giving rise to museums such as the Malki Museum in California and the Colorado River Tribes Museum in Arizona (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:224; Hoerig 2010:67). By 1981, the number of tribally run museums increased to “approximately 40 American Indian, Inuit, and Aleut museums and culture centers in the U.S. and Canada” (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:224). In just ten years, by 1991, this number increased by more than 200%, generating “more than 200 legally constituted organizations throughout North America” (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:225). A number of factors contributed to the establishment of these museums, including the alteration of policies between Native nations and the American government, an alteration in “public attitude” towards Native peoples, and national legislation, including the American Indian Self-Determination and Economic Assistance Act of 1975 (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:225). In addition to these external
influences, there was also a growing desire, among indigenous communities, from an internal standpoint, not only to protect and secure cultural objects, but also to “reclaim sovereignty over the definition and interpretation of their own cultural stories” (Hoerig 2010:67; Fuller and Fabricius 1992:227). A combination of these external and internal factors led to the rapid expansion and creation of tribally run museums.

A “tribal museum,” as defined by Nancy J. Fuller and Susanne Fabricius, (1992:228) is the “generic designation used for all Native American museums and cultural centers.” Fuller and Fabricius (1992:228) arrange tribal museums into four categories: a “tribally-operated” museum, “pan-Indian cultural centers, museums and galleries that are administratively linked to larger institutional entities, and private, not-for-profit museums.” The tribally-operated museums, including the Oneida Nation Museum in Wisconsin, tend to make a tribal council or business committee the “museum’s governing board” (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:228). The pan-Indian museums are typically located in urban locations and include the stories of multiple indigenous communities, such as the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:228). The museums and galleries that are associated with a larger institution that may not be under the control of indigenous peoples include the installation of exhibits within larger museums, such as the Atalona Lodge Museum at Bacone College in Oklahoma (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:229). Additionally, the National Park Service also offers opportunities for Native Americans to install exhibits at visitor centers, such as the Sitka National Historical Park in Alaska (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:229). The not-for-profit museums, the final category described by Fuller and Fabricius (1992:230), tend to receive a majority of their funds through donor contributions, such as the Mattaponi Indian Museum in Virginia. The majority of tribally run museums are found “west of the Mississippi River” (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:230).
Although there are some similarities between tribally run museums and non-tribally run museums, such as the documentation, collection, and interpretation of objects in addition to the types of materials collected, including clothing, tools, weapons, and household items, there are many aspects of tribally run museums that differ from non-tribally run museums (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:230-231; Hoerig: 2010:65).

Perhaps, one of the most notable differences between tribally run museums and non-tribally run museums is patron attendance. As previously mentioned, non-tribally run museums attract a large non-indigenous audience (Hoerig 2010:65-66). On the other hand, tribally run museums typically have a “high percentage” of indigenous guests (Brady 2008:767; Hoerig 2010:65-66). The type of visitors going to a museum impacts the way in which an exhibit is designed. This suggests that the topics discussed at a tribally run museum may differ from those at a non-tribally run museum because of the interest with which patrons are coming into the museums. For example, Native visitors to a tribally run museum may seek to observe how their culture has been “preserv[ed]” by the museum (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:230). Seeing as tribally run museums usually cover topics about the specific Native nation who runs the museum, they tend to have “direct access” to the stories being told (Hoerig 2010:65). This helps eliminate some of the misrepresentations of the indigenous community present within an exhibit because the tribal members themselves are developing the messages they want to be emphasized about their own community (Hoerig 2010:65). Additionally, tribally run museums have the responsibility to be the “protect[or]” of archaeological sites and the “mediator” between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities (Fuller and Fabricius 1992:230-231). However, tribally run museums should not be mistaken as identical for all indigenous communities. Similarly to the differences that exist between non-tribally run museums, so too do tribally run museums come in a variety of
sizes. There is great variance between tribally run museums. Some tribally run museums are large and “rival” non-tribally run museums, such as the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center located in Connecticut (Hoerig 2010:68). Other tribally run museums are relatively small (Hoerig 2010:68). Additionally, the aims of tribally run museums differ. Some tribally run museums aspire to attract tourists from outside of the indigenous community, such as the Seminole Tribe of Florida’s Ah-Ta-Thi-Ki Museum (Hoerig 2010:68). However, others strive to primarily serve community members, such as the Zuni Pueblo’s A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center (Hoerig 2010:68).

The exploration of the differences between non-tribally run and tribally run museums from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the present as well as the brief examination of Native American stereotypes, particularly the “White Man’s Indian,” are critical background narratives that help lay the foundation for the heart of this research. This study observes how Native Americans are represented in non-tribally run and tribally run museums, looking specifically at the presence or absence of stereotypes, namely the “White Man’s Indian,” within a museum exhibit. Essentially, this research aims to uncover how Native peoples are depicted within museums, and how this representation may alter depending on the type of museum one is visiting, either non-tribally run or tribally run. The first museum under observation is the Field Museum.

Non-Tribally Run Museum - Case Study One: The Field Museum

The Field Museum, located in Chicago, Illinois, was founded in 1893 and for the past one hundred and twenty-one years has prided itself on being one of the most renowned educational institutions in the world (The Field Museum Website: History). Although there are countless exhibits within the Field Museum, this research closely analyzes the four primary exhibits
concentrating on Native nations: “The Ancient Americas,” the “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples,” the “Hall of Native North Americans,” and the temporary exhibit in the Webber Gallery. During the time span of my research at the Field Museum, June, July, and August of 2014, the Webber Gallery displayed an exhibit by Bunky Echo-Hawk called “Modern Warrior.”

As I ventured my way through each of the Native American exhibits, I was overwhelmed by the wealth of information present. I observed that there were stark contrasts between a number of the exhibits, some of which aimed to dispel Native American stereotypes, sometimes through the incorporation of co-collaboration. However, other parts of the exhibits directly displayed the twentieth century stereotypical perception of Native Americans as a vanishing, static, and primitive race whose culture could only be preserved through the help of museums (Collier 2003:212; Hoerig 2010:63; Nanda 2007:77). Each exhibit will be analyzed individually, in the order in which one would naturally enter the Native American section of the museum, starting with the “The Ancient Americas” exhibit.

“The Ancient Americas” (Installed: 2007)

Built in 2007, “The Ancient Americas” exhibit is among the newest installations to the Native American section of the Field Museum (Wali). The exhibit, according to the statements of Dr. Alaka Wali, the curator of North American Anthropology beginning in 2010, in an interview on July 15th, 2014, aimed to involve the Native American community, especially through a “relationship with the American Indian Center . . . in Chicago,” specifically, an “advisory group.” Native voices were not only consulted during the process of recreating the space into something more “contemporary,” but these voices continue to remain present throughout the exhibit in the form of “panels” (Wali). The “panels” include a colored photograph of an
individual or group of people that worked with the museum, a key word, such as “Innovation” or “Interaction” and a lengthy quotation from the person or people in the photograph. This quotation is followed by the individuals’ names, the Native community to which the individuals belong, their occupation, where they live, and the span of their lifetime, if they had passed (Wali). These panels are located on the walls of the exhibit with bright lights shining on them for all visitors to see, emphasizing the fact that the exhibit incorporates the voices of indigenous peoples.

“Figure 1 A “Panel” located in ”The Ancient Americas” exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois, July 30, 2014. (Photograph by author.)

“The Ancient Americas” exhibit chronologically journeys through the lives of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, both North and South America. The exhibit focuses heavily
on combining archaeological and scientific discoveries, such as the scientific theory of the Bearing Strait, and traditional Native narratives, including creation stories (Brady 2008:770). At the commencement of the exhibit, the first text label one reads addresses the organizational setup of the exhibit, from the ice age to “Innovative Hunters and Gathers” to “Farming Villagers” to “Powerful Leaders” to “Rulers and Citizens” to “Empire Builders” (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). The explanation provided, which Dr. Wali echoed during her interview, states that often times diverse societies face comparable challenges. Therefore, these societies develop similar solutions to these problems (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). “The Ancient Americas” exhibit aspires to explore how various societies throughout North and South America responded to these obstacles in a manner that does not suggest there was “progress” with time, but rather that “culture change[s] over time” and people, within the culture, “are [the] agents of change,” as Dr. Wali stated in her interview. As the exhibit focuses its attention on these adaptations, it removes the traditional method of displaying Native American cultures by region, a methodology that insinuates Native American communities belonging to that region all live similar lifestyles, devoid of individuality, a group of people whose culture can be generalized (Lonetree 2006:633; Wali). Dr. Wali stressed this idea in her interview, highlighting the fact that the Field Museum, through the design of “The Ancient Americas” exhibit, moved away from “presenting culture areas” and instead decided to explore the “processes of culture change.” As one of the newest Native American exhibits, “The Ancient Americas” distances itself from the traditional presentation of Native Americans in more ways than this organizational setup, including diminishing the idea that Native communities are static. The exhibit demonstrates that even before Europeans arrived to the Americas indigenous cultures could not be labeled as “timeless” because, as twentieth century anthropologist Marshall Sahlins...
argues, indigenous cultures have been changing and adapting to fit their current situations for years, a strategy that continues to exist today (Fair 2000:204; Sahlins: 1999:xx-xxi).

Although “The Ancient Americas” exhibit featured a large number of indigenous communities, the exhibit also managed to provide a significant amount of information on each group addressed. The exhibit relied heavily on artifacts to tell the story of culture change before the arrival of Europeans. However, accompanying these artifacts, there were also detailed text labels that told the story of the group being discussed. For example, in the “Powerful Leaders” section, the exhibit describes the Hopewell societies, which were a group of societies who lived in North America in the eastern woodlands area (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). In the exhibit’s discussion of these societies, in the text labels, it places the Hopewell in context with other peoples and cultures during the same time period, 200BC-500AD, noting how societies, during that time period, all around the world were also constructing “monumental architecture,” similar to that of the Cahokia Mounds located in Illinois (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). In addition to this, there is also information about the Hopewell societies directly, such as tools used by the communities, like atlatls, crafts, including copper cutouts and bird calls, clothing, jewelry, headdress, and the large mounds built by the Hopewell societies (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). This in-depth, contextual information allows the patron to feel well informed about the Hopewell societies. Although there is a vast amount of information that was not included about the societies, for the space provided, the Field Museum displayed quite a bit of information, which typically did not generalize a large group of people.
Despite the fact that the majority of “The Ancient Americas” exhibit included cultural context information when talking about a specific event, object, or community, there was one section of the exhibit that did not follow this pattern. Called “When Worlds Collided,” this part of the exhibit focused on the impact of colonization. The size of this portion is small. When walked from heel to toe across the room, it measured approximately 22 feet by 15 feet.\textsuperscript{5} The only artifacts found within this area were two photographed images of drawings of religious conversion and disease epidemics with nothing more than a paragraph of description for each. This was drastically different from the multiple paragraphs present in the other sections of the exhibit. Additionally, on the opposing wall, there is a photograph of a hide painting completed

\textsuperscript{5} This measurement is the result of walking, heel-to-toe, from wall to wall, based on the researcher’s foot size: six.
by a Cheyenne artist, titled “Warfare,” depicting war scenes between Native Americans and the United States army (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). In the center of the exhibit, there is a tall glass display case. Inside, there is a text label that states that the exhibit should provoke visitors to “reflect on the magnitude of loss inflicted on America’s Indigenous peoples by European invasion” (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). The entire space is dimly lit. At the end of this portion of the exhibit, before entering the circular room with information on living indigenous descendants, there is a sign that notes how “The Ancient Americas” exhibit covered “over 10,000 years” of history predating the arrival of Europeans and states, on a text label on the wall, that in the “future” an exhibit will be created to “examine the tumultuous colonial history of the Americas, covering the Americas from 1492 through today” (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). The inclusion of this text label is important because it shows that the Field Museum is aware of the missing information. However, the lack of details about when this new exhibit will be created makes one question how long the sign has stated this and when something will be done to change it. When will the new exhibit be created? Although there may be a number of factors contributing to the delay of the creation of the exhibit ranging from monetary issues to design complications to an inadequate amount of resources, this lack of information on a very significant portion of Native American history, similarly to the NMAI, leaves the visitor craving for more information and presents an inaccurate and incomplete picture of Native American history. This is a critique given of the NMAI by Native American scholars, such as Amy Lonetree and James Lujan (Lonetree 2006:636; Lujan 2005:516).

Although “The Ancient Americas” exhibit lacks this vital piece of historical information about the Native nations discussed, the exhibit separates itself from twentieth century exhibits through the continued emphasis on change and adaptations indigenous peoples have undergone.
for centuries, eliminating the notion of indigenous communities as static and unchanging. At the end of the exhibit, there is a circular room, filled with large televisions on the walls displaying video clippings of various Native American individuals. The short film segments underline the adaptations and changes indigenous communities have implemented into their lives. The primary message of this room informs visitors that because of the adaptations and transformations indigenous communities have undergone, over the course of centuries, “indigenous peoples are not gone,” but rather, they “draw on their past as they live in the present and prepare new generations for the future” (The Field Museum: “The Ancient Americas”). By stressing the survival of indigenous communities in the twenty-first century, the Field Museum challenges the “vanishing Indian” myth.

“Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples” (Installed: 1982)

The following exhibit, within the Native American portion of the museum, concentrated on the Northwest Coast and the Arctic. The space, titled “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples,” first appeared at the Field Museum in 1982 (Wali). It displays artifacts from various indigenous groups in the Northwest Coast and Arctic regions, focusing on topics ranging from hunting and fishing to village life to spiritual life to art (The Field Museum: “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples). As patrons walk through the large room, gazing at artifacts from the Northwest Coast on the left and objects from the Arctic on the right, visitors gain detailed insight into the world of the people of the Northwest Coast and the Arctic. However, this portion of the Native American exhibit focuses primarily on objects from the “late 1800s and early 1900s,” as the text label at the beginning of the exhibit states (The Field Museum: “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples). A large number of the objects displayed in the exhibit were collected at the 1893 World’s Fair (The Field Museum: “Alsdorf
Additionally, the label continues on to note that these objects are only a “mere snapshot of time” (Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples). While this information is vital to provide to visitors, the Field Museum cannot be certain that all patrons read this information upon entering the exhibit. Therefore, visitors may misinterpret the information inside the exhibit, possibly assuming that because the vast majority of the artifacts within the exhibit come from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that either Native peoples in the Northwest Coast and the Arctic no longer exist in the twenty-first century or that the individuals that continue to exist today have not changed at all and instead have remained static, forever bound to a traditional way of life. Unfortunately, either interpretation would not only be incorrect, but would also be furthering stereotypical images of Native Americans as vanishing or as a culture that is static.

The “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples” was created with the intention of demonstrating how the “environment impacts culture,” using a comparative approach to examine the Northwest Coast and the Arctic, Dr. Wali commented during her interview. Dr. Wali noted that the curator, Jim Vanstone, wanted to be “very respectful” of the indigenous communities and design a space that attempted to remove stereotypes, such as the promotion of a “timeless Indian,” frozen in time. However, due to the continued use of some older dioramas from 1893, there are still some elements hinting at Native American cultures as static, which, according to Dr. Wali, continues to upset some Native visitors. The “static” implications of the outdated dioramas educate patrons about how Native peoples in those communities “lived,” in the past tense, paying little to no attention to how these individuals have “changed” (Wali). The Alsdorf Hall also promotes an unchanging image of Native American cultures through its limited concentration on contemporary topics. There is really only one section, which concentrates on
art, of the entire hall that incorporates contemporary artifacts. This section was very small, comprised of only three display cases in the entire Alsdorf Hall. This failure to include information about contemporary Northwest Coast and Arctic peoples insinuates, to unfamiliar visitors, that Native American cultures stand frozen in time. This image is problematic and provides visitors with the wrong perception of Native American cultures. However, if patrons receive an inaccurate depiction of Native American cultures in the Alsdorf Hall, the “Hall of Native North Americans,” directly following it, only continues to emphasize the notion that Native American cultures are frozen in time, unchanging, and in need of preservation from complete disappearance.

Figure 3 One of the dioramas present within the "Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples" in the Field Museum, July 16, 2014. (Photograph by author.)
Upon entering the “Hall of Native North Americans,” the reasoning behind titling the exhibit the “Hall of Native North Americans” becomes pronounced. Essentially, the exhibit is an elongated, rectangular hall with display cases on either side of the straight walkway that leads visitors out of the exhibit. The hall is separated by region from the Great Plains to the Prairie to the Southwest to the Great Lakes. At the entrance of the exhibit, there is introductory text noting that the hall does not “reflect” the views of the museum in the twenty-first century (The Field Museum). This comment is similar to the one made in the “When Worlds Collided” portion of “The Ancient Americas” (The Field Museum: “The Hall of Native North Americans”). Although this introduction states that the views of the hall are not current, similarly yet again to the sign in the “When Worlds Collided” part of “The Ancient Americas,” it does not list when the Field Museum plans to address the inaccurate viewpoints. However, Dr. Wali, during her interview, did mention some themes the prospective exhibit hopes to include: “how have cultures changed
in the Americas since European conquest and what does that mean? How are Native peoples, in spite of everything, . . . [still] experiencing resilience, still creating a thriving culture?” (Wali). Immediately, upon one’s entrance into the hall, one notices the structure of the exhibit, an exhibit that “fossilizes” Native American cultures, as Dr. Wali called it, through the classification of Native groups by region, the presentation of artifacts based on broad, overarching themes, such as equipment or clothing or basketry or textiles, and a lack of contextual information for numerous artifacts, such as the person who created the artifact, the time period in which it was created, and the significance of the object to the Native community to whom it belongs.

Additionally, in the “Hall of Native North Americans,” Native Americans are presented as a group of people, stripped of their individuality. Not only is there a lack of information concentrating on individual members of any of the indigenous communities mentioned, but the way in which Native nations are displayed within the exhibit also fails to acknowledge the diversity that exists between Native peoples (Büken 2002:47). Instead, it suggests that not only are all Native Americans the same, but that they are distinctly different than non-indigenous peoples. This can be observed in the clothing section for the Plains groups, where the clothing is placed on mannequins. However, as briefly mentioned at the beginning of the text, the mannequins do not have any facial features. Instead, the mannequins are faceless, brown molds, with hands that could hardly be considered hands seeing as they do not even have fingers (The Field Museum: “The Hall of Native North Americans”). This depiction of Native Americans removes the individuality of Native peoples by refusing to add distinct characteristics to the mannequins. Additionally, in their lack of facial features and true hands, the mannequins arguably also present indigenous peoples as somehow less human than non-indigenous people because they are not granted facial features that would denote that they are human. Furthermore,
the faceless mannequins eliminate any chance for visitors to connect with Native American cultures because the cultures are presented in such an aloof manner that patrons may find difficultly trying to relate to a group of people who are not even given faces on mannequins. One potential reason for the design of the hall is due to the time period in which the exhibit was assembled, the 1940s and 1950s, a time period when scholars presumed “disappear[ing]” Native American cultures needed to be “showcase[d]” (Wali). However, despite the overwhelming presence of this 1940s and 1950s mindset within the exhibit, there are a few display cases that incorporate more contemporary information about Native Americans (Wali). For example, in the Navajo section of the hall, there are updated photographs of Navajo women weaving (The Field Museum: “The Hall of Native North Americans”). Unfortunately, this is only a minute portion of the hall. The vast majority of the hall exudes stereotypical images of Native peoples. In fact, it is not until visitors enter the temporary and changing Webber Gallery that they receive a representation of Native American cultures that drastically contrasts the stereotypical view present within the “Hall of Native North Americans.”
Webber Gallery: Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” (Installed: 2013)

Seeing as the Webber Gallery is a temporary exhibit, created in 1987 for a former president of the Field Museum, E. Leland Webber, the information presented in the gallery constantly changes (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). When I conducted my research at the Field Museum, the Webber Gallery displayed an exhibit by Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee) called “Modern Warrior” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Bunky Echo-Hawk is a Native American, a Pawnee artist and activist, who, according to the Field Museum’s website, helped Dr. Wali “co-curat[e]” the exhibit to help “de-bunk stereotypes about Native Americans today,” relying on the “humor” in his art to bring attention to these issues (The Field Museum Website: Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior).
During her interview, Dr. Wali stated that Echo-Hawk utilizes traditional activities, such as painting, to challenge these stereotypes. Echo-Hawk’s blending of a traditional Pawnee activity, painting, with contemporary topics, addressed in the paintings, demonstrates that it is possible to have continuity and change within a culture (Wali). In the “Modern Warrior” exhibit, Echo-Hawk and Wali combined his contemporary, activist voice, which strives to eliminate misconceptions about Pawnee culture, with more traditional artifacts from the Field Museum’s collection. For example, one artifact that is displayed within the exhibit is a Pawnee club, collected by the museum in 1894 (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Next to the artifact is a quote by Echo-Hawk examining a stereotypical understanding of the word “‘warrior,’” a word often associated with bows and arrows (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). However, the club present in the exhibit, Echo-Hawk described in the text label, required a much closer proximity to one’s enemy (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Echo-Hawk then continued to discuss the Indian Wars and how Pawnee people were allies of the United States (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). In his concluding remarks, Echo-Hawk exposes the truth about the outcome of the war with which many may be unfamiliar by declaring that just because the US soldiers were victorious it did not mean that the Pawnee won. Subsequently, the US government removed the Pawnee from their own lands, highlighting the turbulent relationships that often existed between the United States and indigenous communities (Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). The quotation accompanying the club is just one of the many examples found throughout the Webber Gallery installation, all of which provide additional information about Native American cultures, specifically Pawnee culture, to educate visitors about potentially unfamiliar historical information.
In an effort to further his aspirations of removing Native American stereotypes from mainstream, non-indigenous society, Echo-Hawk hosted a painting session with a live audience’s input at the Field Museum on July 19, 2013 (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). The result of this collaborative piece of artwork is one of the focal points within the Webber Gallery. The painting, titled “Is 1491 on my GPS?,” depicts a topless Native American man, who is straddling an iPhone that has the hashtag “#1491” on it while pulling on the cellphone’s plug, wearing leather pants with two feathers in his long black hair (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”).

Next to the painting is a short video about the creation of the painting at the Field Museum. In the video, Echo-Hawk describes that his only stipulation for the topic of the painting was that it had to “have substance and make a difference” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Therefore, the image he drew combined the old with the new. It included the year before Europeans arrived in the Americas with some traditional Native American clothing. However, it also added contemporary elements, an iPhone and a hashtag. In his description of the significance of the painting, Echo-Hawk commented on the fact that because the phone is plugged into the wall, into the “power source,” Native American cultures are “not going to die . . . [they] will be there forever, outlive everyone . . . due to [the] care by [the] museum [the Field Museum]” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Throughout the entire exhibit, Echo-Hawk wanted to break the misconceptions and images of the “last” Native Americans, shattering the “vanishing Indian myth,” and show that indigenous peoples continue to exist today and will continue to exist in the future (Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”).
Echo-Hawk’s desire to break stereotypes surfaces in other pieces within the exhibit as well. His painting titled “Ghost Dishes,” which shows a woman wearing a ghost dance dress standing next to a dishwasher with the phrase “Out with the old. In with the NEW!” at the top, combats the notion that Native American cultures are static by highlighting the process of change that Native American cultures, similarly to every other culture around the world, partake (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Additionally, this painting incorporates the “humor” mentioned earlier. There is an element of humor in an art piece that combines symbolic regalia, a ghost dance dress, with a dishwasher and the phrase “Out with the old. In with the New,” discussing the replacement of Pawnee traditions by both “force” and “choice” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Echo-Hawk appears to be using humor to directly address this
idea. This approach is so different than others and forces one to think about the message Echo-Hawk is trying to deliver to his audience through Native humor.

Echo-Hawk also directly addresses the misconception that Native Americans are savages through his painting called “If Yoda Was An Indian...” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). In this painting, Echo-Hawk portrayed Yoda, the iconic green, wise character from the major motion picture saga, Star Wars, as a Native American, wearing a feathered headdress and face paint. In the description, Echo-Hawk talks about how old Hollywood films portray Native peoples as “savages” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Echo-Hawk then continued to describe how in those old Hollywood films Native Americans are almost always presented as the “‘bad guys,’” the peoples who inevitably lose (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Therefore, Echo-Hawk wanted to take the “ultimate good guy [Yoda]” and present him as a Native American (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Echo-Hawk also noted how this image, Yoda as a Native American, is an “‘empowering’” one for Native Americans, especially considering Yoda’s spirituality (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”).

![Figure 8 Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “If Yoda Was An Indian...,” located in the Webber Gallery at the Field Museum, July 23, 2014. (Photograph by author.)](image-url)
One of the primary issues the artist addresses multiple times throughout the exhibit is how the past continues to impact the present. For example, in his painting titled “WarDrobe,” Echo-Hawk painted a picture of a young girl’s feet dangling above the ground, an illustration that suggested the girl had committed suicide (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). The text label accompanying the painting discusses the severe problem of suicide within the Native American community, an issue that Echo-Hawk states may be attributed to the state of poverty into which many Native Americans are born (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Echo-Hawk continued to address the wrongdoings of the past through a painting called “Blister in The Sun,” which shows a Native American man wearing a gas mask being pulled by ropes on his chest (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). The caption next to the painting describes how the United States government exposed indigenous peoples to radiation “without their consent” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). Another interesting artifact within the exhibit is Echo-Hawk’s paint toolbox which has the word “empowerment” and the year “1491” transcribed on it (The Field Museum). The text label next to the toolbox provides Echo-Hawk’s explanation for the word and year, stating that both are there to “‘remind [himself] of why [he] paint[s]’” (The Field Museum: “Modern Warrior”). All of these explanations, which concentrate not only on exposing the past, but also on its continued influence on the present, help remind visitors that Native Americans not only exist in the twenty-first century, but continue to be impacted by the grim events of their past, even if museum exhibits tend to gloss over a majority of these interactions.

Although Echo-Hawk’s exhibit within the Webber Gallery, in addition to “The Ancient Americas,” seems to be moving in a positive direction, in regards to the representation of Native peoples, there are still two major portions of the Native American section of the museum that
seem to perpetuate stereotypical images of Native Americans. Unfortunately, the Field Museum is not alone in its failure to completely eliminate the presence of stereotypical depictions of Native Americans. Other non-tribally run museums, such as the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian and the Milwaukee Public Museum, also include elements of this in their exhibits.

**Non-Tribally Run Museum - Case Study Two: The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian**

After walking into the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, located in Evanston, Illinois, in October of 2014, I immediately noticed some similarities between the spatial orientation of the permanent section of the museum and the Field Museum. The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, similarly to the “Hall of Native North Americans” at the Field Museum, organized the Native nations according to region, four in total. The four regions included the Woodlands, the Plains, the Southwest, and the Northwest Coast. Within each of these sections, the museum mentioned multiple indigenous communities with no information detailing differences between the groups in each region. This orientation proposes that similarities exist between the various societies belonging to each specific region. For example, in the Plains section, there was a miniature diorama of a tipi as well as a feathered headdress. The incorporation of these artifacts suggests that all Plains Native Americans lived exactly the same lifestyle because there was no evidence to state otherwise. The other regions also expressed the same notion, that all Native nations within a region live identical styles of life. While many Plains peoples may have similar practices, such as wearing feathered headdresses, no two groups are exactly the same, just as no two people are identical. Therefore, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, like the Field Museum, generalizes the groups in the different regions because
it does not list distinct characteristics of the specific nations. However, it is important to keep in mind that a museum cannot list every piece of information about a culture. This would be overwhelming. Therefore, many museums elect to approach Native American cultures from this perspective to provide visitors with some background information about the differences between tribal communities in various geographic areas in North America. Having said this, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian could have differentiated between the societies in each region a little more. One way to include this information is through text labels.

However, for most of the permanent exhibit, called “A Regional Tour of American Indian Cultures” (Installed: No Date), the text labels did not provide this additional information, a similar deficiency found within the “Hall of Native North Americans” at the Field Museum. Within each region, display cases featured significant artifacts. But, the text accompanying these artifacts did not have thick descriptions. Typically, the text included the community from which the object came, the individual who made the object (if known), and the date the object was made. Although this does supply patrons with vital information about the object itself, the labels did not connect the individual objects to the larger cultures. By “connecting the individual objects to the larger culture” I mean to specify the function or purpose of the object within the Native community. How does the object fit within the Native community from which it comes? This information is needed in order to help the visitor look past the obvious utilitarian purpose of the object to understand its importance for the Native community. For example, in the Woodlands section there were artifacts called “box[es] and lid[s]” (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “A Regional Tour of American Indian Cultures”). Two of these sets had animals carved into them. One had an eagle and one had a deer. However, the text label for these two artifacts did not document the significance of the two animals for the Native community, the
Chippewa/Ojibwe and the Odawa, respectively. Additionally, the text only listed the location of each indigenous nation, Manitoulin Island (Ontario) for the Chippewa/Ojibwe box and lid and no location for the Ottawa object. The remaining text noted the year each was made in, 20th century and mid-20th century, and the materials from which the box and lid were made, birch bark and porcupine quills for both. Although this information is useful when trying to pinpoint the design of boxes and lids for a particular century, the text does not place the object within a larger cultural context (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “A Regional Tour of American Indian Cultures”). The visitor is left questioning, why were these artifacts selected? What do they mean to the Woodlands community? Were they used for personal purposes? Were they incorporated into religious ceremonies? What went inside the box? Did anything go inside the box? Do Woodlands communities continue to make these objects? Did all Woodlands communities make them? The list of questions is infinite because there is no information on the role of the box and lid within the Woodlands society.

This lack of cultural context did not just appear in the Woodlands section of the museum. In every region of the museum, there were objects missing labels with this type of description. Cultural context, missing from the “Hall of Native North Americans” at the Field Museum as well, is essential for understanding the specific characteristics of any community. With the exclusion of this information, the objects teach patrons significantly less information, about the Native American community in question, than if this description was included. Also, the exclusion of information has the potential to lead to the misinterpretation of the object’s role within the Native community, thereby paving the way for inaccurate descriptions of the Native community to surface. To push the idea of the importance of text labels a little further, I would now like to turn to the Southwest region of the museum.
In the Southwest portion of the museum, there were multiple Katsina dolls,\textsuperscript{6} from the Hopi nation, in a display case on the wall. The text labels in this case included detailed background information about the Katsina dolls. In contrast to my previous example, these text labels were one of the few text labels that included cultural context. However, the text, having explained the role the Katsina dolls play within Hopi society, to teach Hopi children, neglected to clarify the reason for the variation in the types of Katsina dolls found within the case (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “A Regional Tour of American Indian Cultures”). There are multiple reasons for the exclusion of this information. One potential reason for this may be because of the complexity of the concept of Katsina dolls. Perhaps, the topic delves so deep into Hopi society that it would be difficult to express the concept in a paragraph on a label text.

This presents an interesting dilemma for museums. How should museums approach complex topics, such as Katsina Dolls? Should the museum merely omit the information altogether to avoid confusing visitors or misrepresenting the topic? At the same time, however, if a museum did elect to omit this information, such as the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian did, does the patron miss out on key pieces of background information necessary to understand the culture? There is no easy solution. Museums have to walk a fine line between accurately representing complex or unfamiliar topics to help visitors better comprehend a central aspect of a group’s culture and appealing to an audience that typically does not want to spend twenty-five minutes trying to figure out what one text label is trying to say. Text labels are important, in this sense. Text labels can be viewed in two different ways. The first way to

\textsuperscript{6} The Katsina dolls are referred to by the museum as “Kachina dolls,” an improper spelling of the object according to the Hopi. This is problematic because the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian is not referring to the Katsina dolls in the way in which the Hopi would prefer.
approach a text label is to accept the words written down at face value. The second way to view a
text label is to look at what has openly been declared in the text label and think about what
information is being left out and what types of questions the text provokes. An omission of
information can be just as informative as a four-paragraph text label. Nevertheless, it is
imperative to think about how text labels can be used as tools to describe a community in a
certain way, either overtly or covertly. Museums should pay close attention to their text labels to
truly comprehend the messages they are stating, perhaps causing some to fundamentally rethink
the information either directly stated or omitted.

Now, I would like to switch, much like the museum did itself in tone and style, from the
permanent exhibits to the temporary exhibits, the “Storytelling: Inspiring Traditions for
Generations” (Installed: 2014) and the “All My Relations: A Seneca History” (Installed: 2014)
exhibits. These two exhibits differed greatly from the other portions of the museum. For one, all
of the text labels had in-depth descriptions about the various topics discussed. Most of the text
labels had multiple paragraphs on them. In addition to the drastic change from the minimalistic
text labels in the other portions of the museum, these temporary exhibits integrated the voices of
Native peoples, similarly to Bunky Echo-Hawk’s temporary exhibit within the Webber Gallery
at the Field Museum. For example, the “Storytelling” exhibit, located on the second story of the
museum, incorporated indigenous voices through the inclusion of a video starring a
contemporary Native American woman, Jasmine Alfonso (Menominee and Oneida) (The

At the beginning of the film, Alfonso states that she is an “urban Indian,” meaning that
she does not live on a reservation, but rather grew up in a suburb of Chicago. As the video
progresses, Alfonso tells stories about various events in her life, such as her passion for hip-hop
and her evolving relationship with her mother (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “Storytelling: Inspiring Traditions for Generations”). The video, focusing on storytelling within Native American communities, concentrates on Alfonso’s stories about her own life. But, in the process of doing this, the film conveys messages that speak about much more pressing topics. By having a living Native American woman narrate the video, the film dispels the myth that Native Americans have vanished from society. The video also draws attention to the fact that not all Native peoples live on a reservation, but some choose to live in urban environments. Having said this, Alfonso’s deep devotion to her tribal identity also highlights the fact that just because some Native peoples choose to live outside of a reservation does not mean that they relinquish their tribal identity (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “Storytelling: Inspiring Traditions for Generations”). These messages are extremely different from the almost static appearing nature of Native American cultures on the bottom floor. I recognized differences between the two areas in the museum. The lower level presents a much more general and unchanging view into Native American life. The “Storytelling” exhibit, with the incorporation of Alfonso’s commentary, on the other hand, highlights the distinct aspects of Native American communities, shifting away from large, overarching statements about various regions as a whole to focus on individual stories of contemporary Native Americans. The second temporary exhibit follows this pattern of focusing on personal stories.

The temporary exhibit, “All My Relations: A Seneca History,” is devoted solely to the Seneca nation. Rosy Simas, a member of the Seneca nation, “conceptualized” this exhibit in remembrance of her late grandmother Clarinda Jackson Waterman (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “All My Relations: A Seneca History”). Simas not only provided statements about her community and grandmother, but she also helped decide the major concepts of the
As the exhibit notes the trials and tribulations of the Seneca people, it talks about the creation of the Kinzua Dam in 1957, which forced the Seneca to leave their traditional homeland. After the discussion of this catastrophe, in another area of the exhibit, the text labels shift to focus not on the negative events that have happened to the Seneca people, but on how the Seneca people, even today, have not given up their pursuit to reclaim the land stolen from them with the creation of the Kinzua Dam (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “All My Relations: A Seneca History”). The notion of perseverance persists throughout the entire exhibit, a triumph that Bunky Echo-Hawk also stresses in his “Modern Warrior” exhibit at the Field Museum. This is interesting because this concept is not really highlighted in any other portion of the museum. Perhaps, this indicates a difference in the type of messages indigenous and non-indigenous individuals desire to illuminate to museum audiences. One additional element that existed in this exhibit that was not directly brought up in any other portion of the museum was a direct reference to Native American stereotypes and an attempt to eliminate such stereotypes, much like Bunky Echo-Hawk. For example, there were pennants in one of the display cases. These pennants had words such as “Kinzua Dam” and “Seneca Indian Reservation Salamanca NY” on them (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “All My Relations: A Seneca History”). However, the image on the pennants was that of a stereotypical Native American wearing a headdress. In an effort to break the viewpoint that all Native peoples wear headdresses, the exhibit directly addresses this issue, calling out the incorrect image and replacing it with a more accurate description of the hat members of the Seneca nation historically wore as well as providing an example of this hat (The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian: “All My Relations: A Seneca History”). By directly addressing stereotypes, the exhibit may also reveal another difference in goals indigenous and non-indigenous exhibit designers may have. The
conflicting aspects of the permanent exhibits compared to the temporary exhibits revealed, similarly, to the Field Museum and the Milwaukee Public Museum, a growing divide within non-tribally run museums regarding the presentation of Native nations.

Perhaps, there may be alternatives for museums to use to update their current exhibits without having to invest large sums of money or embarking on a total reconstruction project. It might be possible, through the inclusion of technology, such as digital tablets or access videos on visitors’ own devices, to add the voices of indigenous peoples to preexisting exhibits. For example, in the Hopi Katsina exhibit, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian could incorporate technology that plays videos of a Hopi Katsina artist, such as Justin Lomatewama, talking about what the objects mean to him, his family, and community.

**Non-Tribally Run Museum - Case Study Three: The Milwaukee Public Museum**

Over time, with the introduction of new evidence, commonly held beliefs transform into outdated ideas. As scholars continue to study cultures around the world, the way in which these researchers view the cultures under study change over time (Nanda 2007:76). Typically, a museum exhibit is designed in accordance with the most contemporary theories, at the time of its creation. Therefore, as theories evolve and museums do not update the exhibits, they can reveal an outdated perception of the culture on display. This inaccurate depiction of the culture is most readily noticed when compared to a newer exhibit that does reflect modern theories. These exhibits, the older one and the newer one, typically have different objectives. This was the case at the Field Museum, with the differences in goals between the “Hall of Native North Americans” and Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” exhibit and the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, visited in October of 2014. Upon contemplating what I took away from my visit, I came to the realization that the Native American portion of the
MPM is separated into two main areas: the new exhibit and the old exhibit. After acknowledging this, I began to think about each exhibit separately. Only after doing this did I come to the conclusion that there was one primary difference between the two exhibits: the goal of the exhibit. The new exhibit focused on conveying a message, the message of survival. The old exhibit emphasized daily life by focusing mainly on material objects. These two goals appear at the Field Museum as well.

The first exhibit I entered at the MPM was the new exhibit, “A Tribute to Survival” (Installed: No Date). The name of the exhibit alone suggests the purpose of the exhibit. Called, “A Tribute to Survival,” the exhibit was not only dedicated to the “survival of the American Indian People – A people of culture,” as the text label at the entrance of the exhibit commented, but its central goal was to share this idea with visitors, to inform them that even though Native peoples have suffered many challenges, they have persevered (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). This idea is constantly reinforced throughout the entire exhibit, either through videos of Native peoples talking about their jobs within modern society, outside of a reservation, or through the addition of modern everyday objects that have been influenced by Native Americans, such as Chippewa Sparkling Water, which expressed how indigenous peoples have made and continue to make contributions to American society (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). Seeing as this exhibit intended to promote this message, rather than accentuate artifacts, there were only a few display cases that concentrated heavily on text labels, such as the display case labeled “Myth of the Vanishing Indian.” This display case used text labels to invalidate and directly address the “vanishing Indian” myth, similarly to the pennant display in the “All My Relations: A Seneca History” exhibit at the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. One way in which the text did this was through the addition of information
about modern Native nations in Wisconsin. In an effort to support the statements on the text labels, this display case also featured a map indicating areas in Wisconsin with indigenous inhabitance (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). This was a unique way to try to combat the belief that Native communities have “vanished.” It also exposes how a museum can convey a message without the use of many objects. Another way the museum tried to remove Native American stereotypes was through a co-collaborative approach in the design of the exhibit, such as the work between Bunky Echo-Hawk and Dr. Wali at the Field Museum or Rosy Simas and the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian.

For the MPM, this co-collaboration existed between the museum and members of indigenous communities in Wisconsin. In a video, playing in the exhibit, one of the Native American contributors to the exhibit stated that she hoped the exhibit would help eliminate Native American stereotypes. The elderly woman also longed for the exhibit to be a multi-purpose space where indigenous visitors could go to learn about their heritage and non-indigenous visitors could learn about Native American cultures from an exhibit that incorporated a Native perspective (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). One way in which the MPM included a Native perspective was through an elaborate moving display case of a powwow, representing the modern “all Wisconsin Indian Nation’s Powwow” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). In this powwow, there were life-sized figures standing, in various positions, on a rotating floor that spun around in a circle. But, these figures were not just typical museum molds that look almost identical. These figures were all different, in facial expressions, size, and shape. They were all dressed in colorful regalia. No two people wore the same outfit. The positions of the figures’ bodies were all different, as well. Some were standing straight up, some were bending over, others had their heads tilted sideways, and yet
others looked at the ground. The display of these figures insinuated a sense of individuality, yet at the same time a sense of unity, in that they were all involved in the same action, dancing (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). The figures looked so life-like that I had to do a “double-take” and look at them twice in a row really quickly to determine if the figures were real or not. This projection of individuality greatly contrasts the faceless mannequins displayed within the “Hall of Native North Americans” at the Field Museum. After watching a video on the creation of the exhibit, I learned that the realistic attributes of the figures resulted from the fact that the figures were molds of living members of Wisconsin communities, truly highlighting the distinctiveness of Native peoples.

As part of the co-collaboration process, the MPM not only sought the help of Native Americans for selecting the messages and for clarifying important topics, such as the powwow, but the MPM wanted these individuals to have a more significant role in the creation of the exhibit. Therefore, the MPM asked Native peoples between the ages of 5 and 79 to volunteer to have their faces and bodies molded for the powwow scene. The text label next to the powwow makes a point to thank these indigenous peoples for donating their time, effort, and knowledge to the exhibit (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). This text makes the indigenous peoples’ contribution to the exhibit abundantly clear. It is imperative to remember the instrumental role Native peoples played in the construction of this exhibit when thinking about the types of messages the exhibit projects to visitors and how these ideas differ from those found in an exhibit created by a non-indigenous person. The powwow, representing a twenty-first century powwow, also highlights the fact that Native peoples have not vanished, but in fact continue to thrive culturally, by continuing to carry out traditional practices. This portion of the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit captivates the audience’s attention because of its visual appeal,
the colors and designs of the garments, and the size of it, taking up over one third of the exhibit space (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). These factors, the visual appeal and grandiose size, invite the audience to walk over and view the display case to learn more about it. However, the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit was not only inviting because of the aesthetically pleasing components of it, but it was also inviting in a more literal sense.

On the wall, next to the powwow scene, there was a frame. Inside the frame was a piece of paper that read, “‘You are invited to attend a Pow wow. . .’” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “A Tribute to Survival”). Following this invitation, there was information about powwows patrons had the opportunity to attend. This invitation operated as yet another technique to break stereotypes. The MPM, through the incorporation of this invitation, encouraged non-indigenous visitors to venture outside the comforts of their own ways of life to experience the tradition of another culture. The invitation also addresses the Native woman’s goal, from the video, to reach
out to other Native peoples because the invitation could also be resourceful for Native individuals who may wish to attend a powwow. This invitation really functioned as a “call-to-action,” inciting visitors to take responsibility for their own learning beyond the walls of the museum. Furthermore, this invitation to a powwow may be an attempt to invite visitors to a Native controlled space for further engagement of images of Native cultures created and presented by the indigenous peoples themselves. In a space such as this, the indigenous peoples have the ability to display self-representation more directly. There was no call-to-action message like this in the antiquated exhibit, “North America.”

“North America” (Installed: Circa 1882) is the older exhibit of the two in the Native American section of the MPM. This exhibit did not seek out Native American participation in its construction in the same manner the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit did, perhaps because of its age. Although the exhibit did not list the exact date of its opening, considering the fact that the text label on the wall of the entrance of the exhibit notes that it is “among the museum’s oldest [exhibits],” one can postulate that it was built sometime shortly after 1882, the year the museum opened (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). The MPM addresses this point by stating its age and noting that it needs to be “renovated for future generations,” similarly to statements the Field Museum makes in both the “When Worlds Collided” section of “The Ancient Americas” exhibit and before entering the “Hall of Native North Americans” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). However, it also does not list when such a renovation will be completed in the future. The “North America” exhibit separates Native American societies by regions, just like the older sections of the Field Museum and the permanent section of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian. There are ten regions in total: the Plains Indians, Prairie Indians, Woodlands Indians, Prehistoric Indians, Southeast
Indians, Southwest Indians, California Indians, Basin Indians, Plateau Indians, and Northwest Coast Indians. In each of these regions, the display cases focused heavily on objects and less on telling a story, like the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit. The “North America” exhibit, through its emphasis on artifacts, supplies patrons with a glimpse into the “daily life” of Native peoples, such as clothing items, ceremonial practices, the differences in the roles of men and women, methods of obtaining food, and the various games played within different Native communities (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). By placing such an emphasis on material culture, as mentioned with the “Hall of Native North Americans” at the Field Museum, the exhibit becomes less relatable, this time because there is no underlining story connecting all of the objects together. The “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit appears to be more personal and relatable because it not only presents the story of a group of people who struggled and overcame their obstacles, a story many visitors can relate back to their own lives, but it also displays realistic looking mannequins that actually resemble human beings. In contrast, however, the “North America” exhibit, in primarily focusing on material objects, comes across as depicting the lifestyles of peoples who are dissimilar from non-indigenous peoples, thereby making it difficult for non-indigenous visitors to relate to the topics, thus contributing to a sentiment of “otherness” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). Additionally, the presentation of “daily life” focused its attention mainly on life in the twentieth century, rarely mentioning the daily life of Native nations today. For example, in the Plains section, the patron sees that the section devoted to ceremonies only addresses this topic from a twentieth century viewpoint, seeing as the display case is titled “People of the Plains: An Early Twentieth Century Perspective” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). But, one must remember that this exhibit needs to be updated, according to the museum; therefore, the visitor cannot expect
the display cases to include contemporary artifacts. In addition to this, I also observed elements of the “North America” exhibit that promoted a stereotypical presentation of Native nations: Native cultures are vanishing and therefore need to be preserved and documented. The dioramas in the “North America” exhibit, both miniature and life-sized, embody this stereotype by depicting indigenous cultures as static.

In multiple regions, there were life-sized dioramas depicting the dwellings of communities in that area as well as the daily activities of the indigenous peoples living there. For example, in the Woodlands section there was a life-sized diorama of four Woodlands Indians, three females and one male, “threshing wild rice” (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). The woman standing next to the man held a basket while the man held a stick. Another woman was sitting by a canoe staring at these two individuals. The final figure, a woman, was inside a housing structure looking into a basket (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). The placement of these figures made them appear as though they were frozen in time, unchanging and unmoving, accentuating the misconception that Native cultures are static. However, after reexamining the dioramas, one could argue that it is not surprising that the figures were presented as motionless because they are not living, therefore, how could they possibly move?
Though this may be a compelling argument, the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit broke away from the typical diorama style of simply having the figures frozen in a predetermined position by placing the life-sized figures on a revolving platform. This gave the figures a sense of motion and liveliness, which was absent from every other diorama in the exhibit (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). This is another difference between the two exhibits. It shows how the new exhibit wanted to break away from stereotypical representations of Native Americans in museums as stationary figures that are frozen in time and instead give the audience a representation of Native peoples that is alive and present in modern society. Having said this, there were components of the “North America” exhibit that also supported the message of the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit, the notion of survival. For example, in the Southwest section of the exhibit, when the text labels described Hopi pottery, the labels were more
descriptive and used text written almost entirely in the present tense, using words and phrases such as “is” and “has been revived” to express that the Hopi people have not disappeared (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). Additionally, in the section focusing on the Seminole, there was a text label devoted solely to the “Seminole Today,” explaining the number of tribal members, the modern jobs of men and women, and the type of modern dwellings in which members of the community currently live (The Milwaukee Public Museum: “North America”). Having said this, however, the overwhelming majority of the regional section mentioned very little or nothing at all about the contemporary tribal members living in each region.

**Tribally Run Museum - Case Study One: The Museum of the Cherokee Indian**

In an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the presentation of Native Americans in museums, I did not solely examine non-tribally run museums. But, I also visited two tribally run museums to compare how each type of museum depicted Native Americans. After observing the three aforementioned non-tribally museums, I noticed drastic differences between the concentration of the non-tribally run museums and the tribally run museums, perhaps due to a number of factors, including, but not limited to, the intended audience and parties creating the museum exhibits. On August 31, 2014, I visited the Museum of the Cherokee Indian (Opened: 1948, Renovated: 1998). The Museum of the Cherokee Indian is located within the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians’ (EBCI) 56,000-acre Qualla Reservation (Oakley 2001:133). The reservation is located in present-day Cherokee, North Carolina about forty-five minutes southeast of the Great Smoky Mountain tourist city Gatlinburg. Originally opened in 1948, the museum was renovated in 1998 with the help of increased revenue due to the creation of the Harrah’s Cherokee Casino and Resort (Museum of the Cherokee Indian; Oakley 2001:154). The primary differences between the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and any of the
three non-tribally run museums I visited, the Field Museum, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, and the Milwaukee Public Museum, included an emphasis on individual people, a divergence from general, all encompassing topics, and a constant concentration on the struggles and triumphs of the Cherokee people.

In stark contrast to many of the Native American exhibits located in the non-tribally run museums under observation, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian did not place an emphasis on objects. Instead, the museum concentrated heavily on people and individual people’s stories (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Although there were a large number of objects present within the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the objects seemed to complement the people, not the reverse where the objects were the sole focal point of the exhibit, such was the case for the “Hall of Native North Americans” in the Field Museum. For example, when discussing the ghastly events surrounding the Trail of Tears, there were only a few actual material artifacts, such as one of the muskets used to kill Tsali, arguably a martyr who sacrificed his own life to protect others hiding in the hills of North Carolina during the removal process (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). The remaining part of the Trail of Tears exhibit was reserved for murals and recounts of personal stories, namely those expressed in personal journals or diaries. The murals illustrate the trail that the majority of the Cherokee people followed westward, towards modern day Oklahoma (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). The murals not only display the dreadful journey these individuals made, through changing seasons, but also the pain and suffering countless peoples endured. For example, it is estimated that during the trek West roughly four thousand Cherokee people died, around “one-fourth” of the population, due to an inadequate amount of supplies, such as bedding and clothing, in combination with tiredness and disease individuals contracted along the way (Conley 2005:157; Satz 1989:431). The murals, particularly the sheer pain and
suffering exposed on the individuals’ faces, evoke more emotion than any object could. For example, one portion of the mural illustrates a group of people weeping over the loss of a loved one. Another section of the mural depicts a number of individuals who appeared to be ghosts, presumably representing those people who had passed away along the long journey westward. There was additional despair shown in individuals’ faces once the group reached modern-day Oklahoma, possibly showing the sadness individuals felt having been forcefully removed from their traditional homelands (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Throughout all of these illustrations, one could feel the pain and suffering tribal members must have experienced during this traumatic event in Cherokee history. There is a parallel between the use of art to tell stories in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” exhibit at the Field Museum. By utilizing art to tell a story, these exhibits move away from relying solely on artifacts to express the same messages. This approach is arguably more moving and impactful for visitors.
In addition to the individual accounts of pain and suffering exposed in the murals in the Trail of Tears exhibit, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian also emphasized critical members of the Cherokee community, including Rebecca Neugin, Ostenaco, Principal Chief John Ross, Major Ridge, Sequoyah, and Nancy Ward (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Each of these figures played an important role in Cherokee history. Rebecca Neugin was a victim of the Trail of Tears and her encounter with this appalling event provides greater insight into the events surrounding the removal of the majority of the Cherokee, from a Native perspective, seeing as Neugin’s account is told from her own perspective in her own words. The emphasis on Ostenaco, a member of the Cherokee community who traveled to London and left an impression on the peoples of England, reveals the far-reaching impacts the Cherokee community had on other individuals and demonstrates the international popularity of one Cherokee man. In the Chamber
of Dissenting Opinions, regarding whether or not the Cherokee should accept the 1830 Indian Removal Act, signed by President Andrew Jackson, which would have given the Cherokee land in the West in exchange for their land in the East, two men, Principal Chief John Ross and Major Ridge, are highlighted. As the museum concentrates on these two influential men, one who opposed moving westward, Principal Chief John Ross, and one who promoted moving westward, Major Ridge, individuals and their unique stories are once again emphasized within the museum (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian).

Another key figure in Cherokee history discussed is Sequoyah, the man credited with creating the written form of the Cherokee language known as a syllabary. In a syllabary, each symbol or character stands for one of the eighty-five consonant-vowel clusters found in the Cherokee language (Duncan and Riggs 2003:25). This written form of the Cherokee language was used as a way for tribal members to communicate with one another, to record their language more permanently, and as an attempt to preserve their culture during a time period when the United States government constantly stressed assimilation (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian).

Furthermore, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian also noted a principal female within the Cherokee community, Nancy Ward. Ward is one of the most famous Cherokee women for her role as a peace advocate between the whites and Cherokee people during the formative years of the United States. She is even referred to by some as the “‘Pocahontas of the West’” (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). As the Museum of the Cherokee Indian constantly strives to identify individuals and their personal stories throughout the entire exhibit, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian made the exhibits more relatable because the historical information provided is not devoid of a human element. Instead, the individual stories integrated a personal element that
exhibits that fail to provide contextual information about who created the object and the significance the object holds for the indigenous community from which it comes lack, such as the “Hall of Native North Americans.” However, it is important to note that the Museum of the Cherokee Indian was not the only museum to include personal stories. The Mitchell Museum of the American Indian also included personal stories, such as those of Jasmine Alfonso, the “urban Indian,” and Rosy Simas’ Seneca exhibit which concentrated on her grandmother, Clarinda Jackson Waterman. By focusing on individual people, there was a divergence, at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, from overly generalized topics that categorized all Native nations into a singular group of people. At the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the museum arguably provides a history with Cherokee figures that parallels the presentation of mainstream history. In this sense, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian fills in the gaps the North Carolina public school system misses in its educational requirements for learning about indigenous communities. By providing this narrative, the Cherokee become a people with a specific history, with various influential figures, rather than a community understood primarily in terms of its material culture.
After analyzing the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, I noticed that there were very few explorations of general Native American topics. Perhaps, the most obvious appearance of grand, overarching themes is located at the beginning of the museum, in an exhibit focused on the four early time periods of Native American history (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). However, although this introductory, background section of the museum did incorporate topics that could be applied to all Native peoples, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian still attempted to make this section of the museum personal, to the Cherokee people, through the addition of stories, such as those about weaving practices, and objects, such as woven baskets, that hold a special meaning to the EBCI. Additionally, in the portion of the exhibit describing the arrival of European colonists, which discusses treaties that impacted all Native American communities, the Museum
of the Cherokee Indiana quickly transforms these generalized statements into topics that directly related to the Cherokee community, such as the relationships that existed between the British government and the Cherokee and how this ultimately led to the travel of Ostenaco, a Cherokee man briefly mentioned earlier, from traditional Cherokee land to Europe. Although the Museum of the Cherokee Indian seems to remove sweeping statements about Native Americans in general, it is vital to recognize that a potential cause of this difference may center on the scope that the museum is trying to cover. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian concentrates primarily on the EBCI, one specific Native American community. On the other hand, the Field Museum strives to discuss a wide array of Native American communities. Therefore, in an effort to discuss such a large number of indigenous communities, it may be necessary to incorporate the broad categories, including the separation of Native nations by region, in order to cover a larger number of Native communities. Nevertheless, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian aims to stay away from these overly generalized categories.

Change was also a constant theme throughout the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the notion that life, for the Cherokee, constantly involved changed. Regardless of this change, the Cherokee community continued to persevere and survive, a technique that the Cherokee continue to implement as a thriving federally recognized Native nation in the twenty-first century. Since the arrival of Europeans, the Cherokee people have constantly faced difficult situations, whether it was the deliberate denial of King George III’s Proclamation of 1763 by white settlers or the forced civilization policies and removal, that not only impacted tribal members’ lives in profound ways, but also forced them to adapt their traditional ways of living to accommodate new changes (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Despite all of these changes, the Cherokee people did not give up but persevered and because of this continue to exist today. This continued
existence is highlighted in multiple places throughout the museum, such as in a video in one of the later display cases in the museum, which discussed the myth of the scared belt. In the legend of the burning belt, it is believed that by the fall of 1776 a number of towns in the “Little Tennessee region” had been burned by American troops, except for the town of Chota (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Therefore, a sacred belt was laid inside a house to keep it from being destroyed. In the prophecy, it stated that the reason why the Cherokee people were experiencing problems was because they had moved away from the traditional path. Therefore, if they returned to tradition and saved the belt then they, as a community, would survive. Unfortunately, the belt burst into flames. However, it was not destroyed. But, due to the fact that this burning occurred around the time of removal, the belt disappeared, assumed to have been lost forever. Years later, the belt was discovered in modern-day Oklahoma with the Cherokee Nation, the peoples who moved westward during the Trail of Tears (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). Presently, the belt resides with the Western Band of Cherokees in Oklahoma. This story emphasizes the continued survival of the Cherokee people.

This idea is also further explored at the end of the video where an older woman, dressed in traditional Cherokee clothing, talked about the change the Cherokee people endured. In the conclusion of her monologue, the woman describes the legend of the burning belt, its consumption by flames, and its survival, after which the woman notes “and so do we,” referencing the survival of the EBCI in the twenty-first century (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). The video emphasizes that the Cherokee are still alive today even though their culture may have changed over time, breaking any ideas about the “vanishing Indian” myth. In this video, as well as throughout the entire museum, notions of continuity and change are highlighted, a concept anthropologist Edward Fischer (1999:488) examines in his article titled
“Cultural Logic and Maya Identity: Rethinking Constructivism and Essentialism.” In his discussion of Maya culture, Fischer (1999:488) clarifies that culture is something that is a “historically continuous construction that adapts to changing circumstances while remaining true to a perceived essence of [whatever culture is under study],” for Fischer it was “Mayaness.” Fischer’s description really accentuates one of the central messages of the museum: the Cherokee people have adapted to their environment since before the arrival of Europeans. These adaptations, such as the creation of a written form of the Cherokee language, have arguably allowed for the survival of their culture. However, despite these adaptations, the Cherokee have remained true to key characteristics of their culture. At the very end of the museum, right before visitors exit, this idea is underscored in a text label on the wall that ends with the phrase, “the Cherokees have survived physically, culturally, and spiritually. They are still emissaries of peace” (The Museum of the Cherokee Indian). These messages of survival are also present within the three non-tribally run museums mentioned earlier. It should be noted that the majority of these messages are located within exhibits that incorporated the help of Native American voices and opinions, perhaps hinting at differences in goals between non-indigenous and indigenous curators and directors in regards to what messages museum visitors should take away from an exhibit concentrating on indigenous peoples. Additionally, while the “White Man’s Indian” stereotype is not directly addressed within the museum itself, the individual stories and messages of change and survival appear to contrast the “White Man’s Indian” stereotype. Furthermore, the mission statement of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, which states that the museum aims to “‘perpetuate the history, culture, and stories of the Cherokee people,’” in a sense also hints at a goal that involves presenting the Cherokee as a nation that should not be reduced to the “White Man’s Indian” stereotype (Museum of the Cherokee Indian). The museum
does not come out and directly note the stereotype’s inaccuracies. However, one could argue that in a sense the Museum of the Cherokee Indian is speaking out against the portrayal of indigenous peoples through the lens of the “White Man’s Indian” because of the stories and topics discussed within the museum in combination with the goal of continuing to share and educate individuals on these factual stories, a goal that the Oneida Nation Museum arguably possesses as well.

Tribally Run Museum – Case Study Two: The Oneida Nation Museum

Located within the heart of the Oneida Reservation in DePere, Wisconsin, the Oneida Nation Museum (Circa 1980) (USA Today 10 Best), run by the Oneida Nation itself, concentrates on a number of topics on which the Museum of the Cherokee Indian also focused,

[Figure 13 Painting of the belt from the legend of the burning belt scrolled across the wall of a room in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, August 31, 2014. (Photograph by author.) [Artwork copyright 1998, Museum of the Cherokee Indian]]

7 The reliability of this website is questionable. However, after continuously searching for the opening date of the Oneida Nation Museum, this was the only source that provided any type of information. This speaks to the intended audience of the museum, specifically an aim to appeal to an internal audience, seeing as it was extremely difficult to find out any additional information about the museum aside from its location and hours of operation. This is critical to keep in mind while reading about the Oneida Nation Museum.
such as telling individual stories and ensuring that the patrons walk away confident that the
Oneida continue to exist in the twenty-first century. I visited the museum on December 19, 2014.
Located throughout the museum, there are small snippets of information, similarly to the
Museum of the Cherokee Indian, that concern directly about specific members of the Oneida
Nation and how they have contributed to the Oneida Nation’s story. For example, when
discussing the First World War, the museum notes influential tribal members, especially by
listing the names of men who enlisted and the position they acquired, such as Levi Parker
Webster who was Staff Sergeant of the 54th Pioneer Infantry (The Oneida Nation Museum). In
this portion of the museum, it also commented on nurses, such as Cora Elm Sinnard, who helped
during the conflict.

Furthermore, there was an entire display case devoted to a single woman, Maria Hinton,
an Oneida woman who made a profound impact on the Oneida community (The Oneida Nation
Museum). Maria Hinton was a very well respected tribal elder who constantly strove to preserve
Oneida culture, especially through educational pursuits that emphasized language. The display
case, which concentrates on her life, highlights how important individuals are to a community
(The Oneida Nation Museum). In fact, all of the small anecdotes about specific tribal members
reaffirm the fact that it is nearly impossible to understand a community without having some
background information about the critical figures that make up that society, an aspect the older
portions of the non-tribally run museums fail to include. In addition to the inclusion of personal
stories, the Oneida Nation Museum also continues to emphasize the importance of individuality,
disregarding notions of a group of people all being exactly the same. One way in which the
Oneida Nation Museum accomplishes this is through the mannequins displayed throughout the
museum, specifically the distinctive features that make them all unique. In contrast to the
mannequins located in the “Hall of Native North Americans,” the mannequins displayed within the Oneida Nation Museum looked realistic (The Oneida Nation Museum).

The Oneida Nation Museum also differentiated itself from the non-tribally run museums and aligned itself more closely to the tribally run museum, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, by placing an emphasis on the continued perseverance and presence of the community in contemporary society. There were a number of ways in which the museum went about doing this. One way in which the Oneida Nation Museum projected this message was through the continued emphasis on contemporary artisans throughout various sections of the museum. For example, when discussing corn husk dolls, the Oneida Nation Museum made an effort to not only tell visitors about the importance of corn for Oneida diet and that corn husk dolls have been made by Oneida tribal members for years, but also how contemporary artists, like Judith L. Jourdan, continue to make corn husk dolls (The Oneida Nation Museum).

Another way in which the Oneida Nation Museum told the story of their survival was through stories of change over time, similar to the way the Cherokee expressed their continued survival in the Museum of the Cherokee Indian. Take for instance, the Oneida’s recollection of the arrival of Europeans and how their world was fundamentally altered with the introduction of these foreign people. However, after noting the changes that occurred after Europeans arrived to Oneida territory, the Oneida Nation Museum switched its focus from the past to the present to note how the Oneida, like the Cherokee, adapted to these changes in order to survive. There are numerous examples of these survival stories present throughout the museum, such as when describing the community’s removal from the Oneida Nation’s traditional homeland in modern-day New York to present-day Wisconsin (The Oneida Nation Museum). This horrible story of removal, as explained by the museum, did not cause the Oneida people to give up, but instead,
provided them with the opportunity to continue practicing their culture in a new location as well as the ability to demonstrate that their community could not easily be destroyed, but would adjust to new circumstances and continue to exist, which it still does today.

Similarly to the Cherokee in North Carolina, the Oneida Nation also utilizes its museum to discuss topics and figures that may not be addressed in the curriculum within the state of Wisconsin. Therefore, both tribally run museums are attempting to demonstrate to visitors that there are multiple elements of history, specifically Native American history, that are not addressed within the common state curriculums in North Carolina and Wisconsin. The Cherokee and the Oneida Nation both arguably use their museum as a way to discuss all of the events and describe all of the figures that are not taught to the majority of K-12 students in the state of North Carolina or Wisconsin. Therefore, because of this lack of information, the Cherokee and the Oneida Nation have taken it upon themselves to give visitors these missing stories, to help provide the details that the common curriculum within both states, due to the small amount of information provided, do not cover, as the emphasis of the curriculums focuses elsewhere, such as the United States.

**Conclusion**

A museum is not merely a venue where artifacts go to be preserved. A museum is also an educational resource that teaches the public information on a variety of topics ranging from prehistoric fossils, like a Tyrannosaurus rex, to the lifestyles of cultures around the world, including Native American communities. In this ethnographic study, I analyzed how indigenous cultures are presented in non-tribally run and tribally run museums, examining specifically for the inclusion of stereotypical images of Native American cultures. In order to directly explore this topic, I visited three non-tribally run museums: the Field Museum, the Mitchell Museum of
the American Indian, the Milwaukee Public Museum and two tribally run museum: the Museum of the Cherokee Indian and the Oneida Nation Museum. Based on my fieldwork, having spent numerous hours at each museum, there are differences in the way in which Native American cultures are presented in non-tribally run museums and tribally run museums ranging from the presentation of Native American cultures as the “White Man’s Indian,” which includes sweeping generalizations that depict Native peoples as static, primitive, and vanishing, to stories of individuals and messages of perseverance and survival. The differences in these presentations are influenced not only by the museum staff designing the exhibits, but also the intended audience of the exhibit, non-indigenous or indigenous, the time period in which the exhibition was created, and whether the exhibit is permanent or temporary.

The intended audience impacts the construction of an exhibit, an audience that arrives to a museum with certain expectations regarding the topics about which they anticipate to learn. The primary audience for non-tribally run museums and tribally run museums typically are not the same. The majority of patrons visiting non-tribally run museums are non-indigenous, while a “high percentage” of patrons visiting tribally run museums are indigenous (Hoerig 2010:65-66). Therefore, the messages exposed throughout the exhibits tend to differ, simply based on the desires of the specific audience of the exhibits. For example, non-indigenous visitors, often times, carry stereotypical opinions about Native Americans, whether it be that indigenous peoples are savages, environmentalists, princesses, squaws, or the never failing “White Man’s Indian,” whose culture is static, primitive, vanishing and “ends of the battlefield” (Barker and Dumont 2006:119; Schultz 2011:8). This story, according to Joanne Barker (Lenape [Delaware Tribe of Indians]) and Clayton Dumont (Klamath/Umpqua) (2006:111, 119), both Native American, asserts that this is the “Indian [non-indigenous people] recognize and this is the
history they want confirmed.” In their article, “Contested Conversations: Presentations, Expectations, and Responsibility at the National Museum of the American Indian,” Barker and Dumont (2006:122) record the observations of National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) staff, noting that these NMAI employees have observed “visitors’ frustrations with the lack of more familiar historical narrations.” One cultural interpreter, a Native American man, even recounted to Dumont that he “encounters,” on a “regular” basis, visitors who “want ‘people of the past,’” a history that is characterized by “‘massacres and . . . blood’” (Barker and Dumont 2006:122). Museums must acknowledge what patrons crave to view in an exhibit and try to find some common ground to please such hopes, all the while maintaining a central educational message within the exhibit (Schultz 2011:8). Typically, these stereotypical beliefs are the result of a lack of in-depth knowledge about Native American cultures.

Therefore, in an attempt to educate the non-indigenous public on the widest range of Native nations possible, non-tribally run museums tend to gloss over the uncomfortable dimensions of American history, failing to include topics including removal and boarding schools, so that the museums can cover multiple nations in a short amount of space and text. Unfortunately, in this attempt, more often than not, the non-tribally run museums unintentionally reinforce these negative and confining stereotypes because of their inability to delve deeper into the topics being discussed. On the other hand, tribally run museums are able to explore topics at greater depth for a number of reasons. One reason may be because visitors, frequently indigenous peoples, may have more background knowledge about the peoples and events being discussed. Thus, tribally run museums can be more specific. Additionally, tribally run museums tend to focus on one community in particular, such as the Cherokee or the Oneida, and therefore do not have to grapple with the issue that many non-tribally run museums face in attempting to
talk about ten or more nations within a finite amount of space. However, the intended audience is not the only factor impacting the depiction of Native Americans in museums, the age of the exhibit, whether its construction is old or new, also plays a large role.

Similarly to culture, museums also are not static. Seeing as they aim to accurately reflect the cultures they display, museums must constantly undergo change, especially regarding how a culture is presented in an exhibit, as new evidence and new interpretations become available as anthropologists and other scholars continue to conduct more research on the cultures under study (Brady 2008:770). These exhibits, the older one and the newer one, tend to have dissimilar objectives. Compared to the outdated methods of older museum exhibits, such as the presentation of Native American cultures as simple and easily classifiable based on region in the “Hall of Native North Americans” in the Field Museum designed in the early to mid-twentieth century, a number of more contemporary exhibits try to break away from this tradition. These newer exhibits strive to present a picture of these cultures as something much more complex, such as the “A Tribute to Survival” section of the Milwaukee Public Museum (MPM) (Nanda 2007:76).

In the MPM, there are drastic differences between the new “A Tribute to Survival” and the older “North America” exhibit. The “North America” exhibit exposes the outlook scholars had, arguably in the twentieth century, which appears to have focused on “preserving” Native American cultures, particularly by centering its attention on objects instead of telling a story. The new exhibit, “A Tribute to Survival,” not only communicated one comprehensive story throughout the entire exhibit, but also invited Native peoples to be involved in the creation of the exhibit, a process commonly referred to as co-collaboration. This style of design, co-collaboration, appears to be a relatively new approach used when constructing Native American
exhibits. By including the voices of Native peoples, a co-collaborated exhibit may reflect topics that are important to the individuals who helped collaborate on the project, such as an attempt to break down preconceived notions about Native Americans, like the “A Tribute to Survival” exhibit did. This drastic difference between an old and new exhibit within a museum is also found at the Field Museum, especially when comparing “The Ancient Americas” exhibit and Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” exhibit, both created in the twenty-first century, to the “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples,” built in the late twentieth century, and the “Hall of Native North Americans,” constructed in the early to mid-twentieth century. Therefore, contemporary museums and contemporary exhibits within older museums try to apply the practice of reflecting a more contemporary view of cultures in its exhibits. In these museums and exhibits, they do not merely focus on a preexisting narrative of a nation-state, but they also give an adequate amount of attention to incorporating the unique stories of other cultures that do not belong to the majority group (Nanda 2007:76-77). These contemporary exhibits afford visitors with the ability to learn about another culture from a different perspective than what they might have anticipated or learned about in the past (Nanda 2007:77; Schultz 2011:3).

Another aspect that seems to play a role in how Native American cultures are presented in museums centers on whether the exhibit is permanent or temporary. After visiting the five museums, it became clear, especially at the non-tribally run museums, that there is a difference in the way in which Native American cultures are presented depending on whether or not the exhibit is permanent or temporary. Typically, a permanent exhibit includes more stereotypical depictions of Native Americans, presenting Native American cultures as the “White Man’s Indian.” This is observable at the Field Museum, in the “Hall of Native North Americans” and the “Alsdorf Hall of Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples,” and at the Mitchell Museum of the
American, in the section that separated the nations by region and included little information about the differences between the various communities within that region, which suggested that Native American cultures, at least in a particular region, are all the same. The small amount of text on the labels, which, for a majority of the artifacts within each museum, did not provide the importance of the objects for the nation, insinuates that in order to understand Native American cultures one can simply look at artifacts and associate those objects with that specific Native nation without knowing the role the object plays within the community.

However, the temporary exhibits, within the Field Museum and the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, challenge these “stereotypical” representations of Native American cultures as something that can be understood in general terms without much detail. These exhibits, such as Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” exhibit at the Field Museum and the “Storytelling” exhibit and the “All My Relations: A Seneca History” exhibit at the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, were much more detailed than the permanent exhibits. They exposed a complex depiction of Native American cultures, one that is not one-dimensional and cannot easily be understood with a few words on a text label as the permanent exhibits seemed to imply. These exhibits were also more contemporary, in the sense that they spotlighted modern indigenous peoples. The inclusion of these individuals, such as Bunky Echo-Hawk, Jasmine Alfonso, and Rosy Simas, highlight that Native cultures continue to exist today.

Seeing as these temporary exhibits contained first-hand accounts from living Native Americans, the stories were also more personal. The exhibits did not simply include objects with a small text description. Instead, these temporary exhibits told personal stories: the dreams, struggles, and perseverance of actual people. In addition to this, these stories reflected ideas and concepts that were important to the Native peoples themselves. For example, Alfonso’s
statements profess a desire to share that not all Native peoples live on reservations. Additionally, Bunky Echo-Hawk’s “Modern Warrior” exhibit highlighted his sincere longing to combat the proliferation of Native American stereotypes in mainstream society. This drastic difference between the temporary exhibits and the permanent exhibits is an observation with which one should be familiar. It stimulates many questions. Why is there such a stark difference between the two portions of a museum? Why does the permanent section of a museum not include more Native voices or contemporary elements? As I continue to study the representation of Native Americans in museums, I hope to be able to unravel some of these questions.

One way to possibly approach this topic, in the future, to better understand the similarities and differences between Native American exhibitions in museums, is through a refinement in methodology. One possible way to refine the methodology includes designing an exhibit analysis checklist that could be utilized at multiple museums to broaden the scope of the research, making the study much more robust and supported by a larger sample than the five museums provided in this research. The checklist could include a list of “yes” or “no” questions on it. For example, was the exhibit co-curated? Was the exhibit temporary? Was the exhibit permanent? Was the exhibit constructed in the twentieth century? Was the exhibit constructed in the twenty-first century? Is the exhibit run by indigenous peoples? Is the exhibit run by non-indigenous peoples? By implementing a checklist that has specific characteristics researchers are observing, it not only standardizes the methodology, making the approach applicable to a wider range of museums, but it also enables researchers to potentially conduct a statistical analysis of the data. A statistical analysis could help inform researchers of commonalities between museum exhibits that reinforce Native American stereotypes in addition to commonalities between museum exhibits that stray from presenting Native American cultures in stereotypical ways.
Based on these results and its exposure of some of the primary issues facing Native American exhibits, museums may be better equipped to alter their exhibits. For now, however, I am left with the impression that museums face many obstacles when trying to construct an exhibit. Consequently, these obstacles impact the way in which Native American cultures are presented in museums. Despite these limitations, there are a number of ways in which museums, both non-tribally run and tribally run, can alter the way in which Native American cultures are depicted.

One recommendation for the future includes altering the intent of the museums. Lainie Schultz, from the Australian National University (2011:1-2), argues that museums can no longer simply be places of research and education, but they must also be used as venues of “social activism,” aimed at “empower[ing] . . . marginalized communities” by enabling these communities to utilize the resources within the museum as well as serving as an “intermediary” between such communities and the larger society by providing information. Additionally, Schultz (2011:4) argues that a museum should not be “‘about something,’” but rather “‘for somebody.’” In this statement, Schultz (2011:4) suggests that because of the fact that learning is an incredibly individual process, a museum should focus on speaking to each visitor rather than on telling the story of an object. One way in which museums may be able to accomplish this objective is through the continued use of co-collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous parties in the creation of Native American exhibits. Through the continued use of such an approach, museum may be able to present Native American cultures with “more accuracy and realism and less inaccuracy and fiction in the content and illustration portrayal of Native Americans” (Hawkins 2005:52). Perhaps, co-collaboration could also exist between museums, not simply within one museum. For example, there are many advantages to the commencement of a relationship between the Field Museum and the Oneida Nation Museum.
The Field Museum could lend materials and support to the Oneida Nation Museum; and the Oneida Nation could, similarly to Bunky Echo-Hawk, offer a different perspective on objects that are already in the Field Museum’s collection, thus enhancing visitors’ understanding of the Oneida Nation.

Unfortunately, there are issues with co-collaborative exhibits, besides the fact that some indigenous peoples struggle to have their voices heard. One challenge with co-collaborative exhibits is attempting to craft them in a way that speaks to an indigenous community, but also appeals to a non-indigenous community as well (Hoerig 2010:71). Another issue with collaborative exhibits may rest in the fact that many visitors fail to comprehend the ideas and purposes of such exhibits (Schultz 2011:6). Often times, patrons are not familiar with analyzing who helped develop an exhibit (Schultz 2011:6). Therefore, because a number of patrons may not think about this aspect of an exhibit, museums struggle to stress the collaboration efforts that went into an exhibit (Schultz 2011:6-7). Additionally, a number of visitors are not accustomed to visiting exhibits that are the product of collaboration with Native communities. Therefore, some patrons do not notice this presence within the exhibits (Schultz 2011:8). Sometimes, this collaborative effort goes unacknowledged, something that should be improved upon in the future (Schultz 2011:2, 8). Although a museum may be familiar with the collaboration, the visitors may not (Schultz 2011:2). If a museum aims to be an agent of social change, then it is vital that patrons are informed of any collaboration with Native peoples so as to help visitors understand that the exhibit was created in an attempt to promote self-determination and self-representation for the indigenous communities. If a patron is unaware of this relationship then it may be difficult for him or her to recognize the social activism present within the exhibit (Schultz 2011:2). In a co-collaborated exhibit, the collaboration should be prominent within the exhibit so
as to not only emphasize the effort of the Native individuals involved and help promote self-representation, but also to help eliminate the presence of Native American stereotypes in the museum by emphasizing how indigenous peoples wish to be portrayed. However, one way in which a museum can attempt to challenge patrons to recognize the Native voice within an exhibit is through the implementation of real, first-hand accounts (Schultz 2011:7). By personalizing the stories, visitors have the ability to “connect” to the material within the exhibits (Schultz 2011:8). The relationship between museums and Native peoples is not perfect. It continues to face challenges and “evolv[es]” everyday (Lonetree 2006:634). This is a process that must continue to occur in order for the depiction of Native peoples to constantly change and become an image that indigenous communities accept and approve.
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