

# Defining and Redefining American Indian Identity: an Examination of the Role of the Museum in Contemporary Ethnogenesis in the United States

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## Abstract

As a platform for the display of cultures and a structuring agent in their formation, museums play a unique role in the negotiation of social identities. A museum's approach to the interpretation of identity is shaped by the socio-political climate in which it exists. In the United States, a nation-state atmosphere celebratory of diversity, but not quite post-colonial, acts as the lens through which museums engage with issues of identity. Here, notions of difference, immigration, an indigenous past, and emerging ethnic identities are all at play in the negotiation of social identities. In this context, the acceptance of the generalized designation 'American Indian' as an ethnic identity is seen not only in national museums, but also in private museum exhibits and in local museums constructed by source communities. Through the definition, display, and reinforcement of specific cultural traits, these museums are contributing to the ethnogenesis of an American Indian identity.

Key Words: Social identity, ethnic identity, ethnogenesis, culturally specific museum, American Indian,

*What any hypothetical "we" may have in common, our identification with each other may have as much to do with our perception of shared difference from a real or imagined "other" as with any intrinsic similarity among ourselves (Voss 2008: 14).*

## Introduction

In a recent Associated Press article on the situational benefits to claiming 'Asian American' as an ethnic identity in college applications, students interviewed variably identified themselves as either 'Asian' or 'White' depending on which social identity they felt would be more likely to result in an acceptance letter.<sup>1</sup> The article states: 'Susanna Koetter, a Yale junior with an American father and Korean mother, was adamant about identifying her Asian side on her application. Yet she calls herself "not fully Asian-American. I'm mixed Asian-American. When I go to Korea, I'm like, blatantly white".'<sup>1</sup> Regardless of its intent, this article effectively portrays the thoughts of this generation of Americans about their perceived ethnic ties. Increasingly, younger American generations are choosing and manipulating ethnic labels that encompass broad social identities encapsulated by terms such as 'Hispanic', 'Asian American', or 'American Indian,' rather than any tie to a more specific ethnic identity.

This phenomenon may be investigated further through an examination of the role of the museum as both a mirror and an agent of social change in the United States. Here, I introduce the theoretical concept of ethnogenesis and demonstrate its potential utility in the context of museum studies through three brief reviews of museums that portray notions of American Indian identity. A detailed review of the evolving relationship between American Indian communities and museums is not my intent for this study.<sup>2</sup> Rather, in order to demonstrate that museums play an active role in the formation and solidification of ethnic identity, I introduce a theoretical framework adopted from social identity studies that offers a new and different mode of understanding the relationship between museum practice and social identity.

## The Display of Social Identity

As a conduit for display and as the Great Preserver of material culture, theorists have argued that museums are 'contact zones' between a dominant culture and the often peripheral minorities whose objects they display and whose culture they represent (Clifford 1997; Phillips 2005; Mason 2006). Through exhibition, museums lend a staged authenticity to objects as they are re-contextualized and given new life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Most often, the source community and the visiting community are very different and, historically, the museum was responsible for the representation of one to the other. This tripartite nature of communities in relation to museum work recently has shifted to a focus on the changing relationship between communities in an attempt to put colonial undertones to rest. For example, there is a recent trend in museum practice toward awareness of and interaction with source communities as they are increasingly called upon to participate in the telling of their story and the display of their objects (Peers and Brown 2003). These relationships produce exhibitions that are still representing some particular slice of another's social identity, but there is a sense that involvement of representatives increases the chance of a more accurate depiction (Szekeres 2002).

National museums have the added responsibility of conveying a narrative that more and more strives to be celebratory of the pluralism and multi-culturalism of the state. As Richard Sandell (2007: 2) notes, 'In recent years, museums have become increasingly confident in proclaiming their value as agents of social change and, in particular, articulating their capacity to promote cross-cultural understanding, to tackle prejudice and intolerance and to foster respect for difference'. I would argue, however, that in their gathering, defining, and display of what it means to be a certain *something* or *someone*, museums are actually re-defining whatever identity it is that they are displaying. In this way, museums act as agents in a complicated flow of the contemporary genesis of new or altered ethnic identities. Thus, despite attempts to codify, preserve, and celebrate extant diverse ethnic identities, culturally specific museums in particular are creating conglomerate groups and solidifying boundaries in ways that are neither essentially positive nor negative, but that will shape social identities for the foreseeable future.

Social theorists have employed various frameworks to explore how museums collect and display objects. The model referred to above, which describes museums as 'contact zones' places the museum as a type of mediation zone between the culture displaying the object and the culture from where the object came (Clifford 1997). Tony Bennett (1998: 212) criticizes this model, pointing out that the museum is a 'centre of dispatch' that acts to construct meaning as artefacts and concepts are channelled through. Robin Boast (2011: 67) argues that there is a further issue with conceptualizing the museum as contact zone: that the model is inherently neo-colonial because a museum is essentially 'a site in and for the centre'. I would argue that the model itself is not the issue as much as the awareness and persistence of these neo-colonial undertones. The conceptualization of museums as contact zones offers a useful account of the way in which museums play an active role in the hybridization of cultures and the fostering of new ethnic identities. Chappell (1993: 267) emphasizes the anthropological tone of Clifford's contact zones and defines them as 'zones of transformative interaction between systems'. Thus, rather than view the museum as a zone of permeable boundaries, where mediation represents one side to the other, giving agency to the museum's formation and transmittal of the message allows for the emergence of new identities in contact situations. The museum's re-contextualization of items on exhibit, as well as the visitor's engagement with the ethnic identity being portrayed, operates to produce several levels of abstraction, redefinition, and solidification of social identities.

In order to explore the implications of the proposal that museums play an active role in the creation and manipulation of ethnic identity, I look to the culturally specific museum in the United States and its role in the solidification of American Indian, or Native American,<sup>3</sup> ethnic identity. As Nelia Dias (2008: 5) notes, 'Examining the notions of cultural difference and cultural diversity not in abstract terms but rather in a particular field provides a good example of how concepts can shape practices, in this case museum practice'. Further, this investigation sheds light on how a museum visitor's experience acts as a reflection of negotiations of identity within the larger socio-political context. By employing ethnogenesis as a theoretical construct, this

study examines the culturally specific museum's role in the negotiation of social identity and aims to illuminate the events occurring in museums across the country, and, hopefully, open the door to further thinking about the notion of hybridity in both the development of social identity and the museological role in this process. While this study focuses on the role of the museum in an American context, the notion that the museum directly contributes to the development and solidification of multiple forms of social identity is an application with cross-cultural and global implications for further research.

### **Ethnic Identity and Ethnogenesis in the United States**

In order to examine the museum's role in the formation and solidification of social identity in the United States, it is necessary to establish what is meant by 'ethnic identity' and to examine how the socio-political history and climate of the United States contribute to notions of diversity, difference, and their display. Museum studies recognize that social identities increasingly should be perceived, as Macdonald (2003: 6) states, as 'endlessly in the process of creation', rather than as bounded entities with static and uniform characteristics. In this way, social identity is neither the passive result of socialization, nor the product of intentional manipulation. Rather, it is a mutable, multi-dimensional aspect of an individual that is both personal and collective. Ethnic identity, as a facet of social identity, can be solidified, altered, or renegotiated throughout the life course of an individual (Barth 1969). Individuals can identify with single or various ethnic identities at any one time, and these 'are accompanied by and determine rights, duties, chances, expectations, forms of exclusion and conflict, and feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and fear about, for example, stigmatization and discrimination' (Verkuyten 2005: 10). Therefore the study of ethnicity should not focus exclusively on ethnic *groups*, but should encompass the ebb and flow of the creation and dissolution of ethnicity as a response to various internal and external pressures (Brubaker 2004).

Ethnic identity operates within a feedback loop where individuals negotiate with and subsequently alter social mores (Meskell 2001). The study of ethnogenesis in a contextually specific situation impacts our understanding of social processes. As an avenue for the approach to changing relationships over time, ethnogenesis may be defined as 'the birthing of new cultural identities' (Voss 2008: 1) or, perhaps more useful here, as one of gradual change, an 'ethnomorphosis' (Kohl 1998). For the purposes of this discussion, I utilize Albers (1996: 94) notion of ethnogenesis as a process that can be understood within a continuum of fluid identities:

One end of this continuum is represented by a *polyethnic alliance formation*...at the other end is the *emergent ethnic community*, where the process of ethnogenesis has reached completion. Here groups that were once distinct are now joined. Indeed, they become so intermingled that they are virtually indistinguishable from their parent populations, but they also assume an ethnic identification that is distinctive as well. It is an identity that emphasizes unity and solidarity over any differences from their ethnic pasts.

Additionally, it is useful to consider the structure that individuals inhabit in these contexts and its role in producing the atmosphere through which we view the world (Giddens 1984).

The pressures under which various identities may arise or dissolve in the contemporary United States take multiple forms: an increasingly multi-cultural society, a multi-partisan political system, a colonial history, failure to acknowledge past injustices, etc. The museums discussed here demonstrate that while celebratory of pluralism, the socio-political organization of difference and its manifestations in museums across the United States rest upon a very specific emerging form of ethnic identity. Just as the children of the American Revolution increasingly do not speak or think of themselves as 'British' or 'British American', or 'Dutch' or 'Dutch American', but simply 'American' in some real sense, the somewhat arbitrary and broad categories of social identity enveloped in terms such as 'Hispanic,' 'Asian American' and 'American Indian' may be seen as emergent ethnic communities. In many ways, the encouragement and widespread embrace of these generalized identities is the direct result of a perceived relationship with an indigenous past and a failure by the dominant culture to own

up to this past. A nation-state caught between maintaining a celebration of a multi-cultural past and pushing toward a future hostile to immigration offers the prevailing notion of 'American' identity, hybrid or otherwise. Subsequently, nuanced difference increasingly is celebrated as heritage rather than a lived, contemporary reality.

### **Museums and Ethnogenesis**

This multi-faceted identity construction is at times difficult to see in a museum run principally by the source community, as communities are actively engaged in the formation of boundaries and the awareness of inclusion and exclusion based on certain cultural characteristics (Crooke 2006). It is often much easier to see the transition from polyethnic alliances to emergent ethnic communities in 'outsider' exhibitions presented to 'outsider' target communities. This begs the question, is the museum actively contributing to identity construction? Or, is it simply mirroring the social context?

The human capacity for cultural transmission is essential to an understanding of the museum's role in ethnogenesis. The notion of cultural transmission and its contextual differentiation has been explained in terms of the interplay between the environment and the learning and developmental processes of individuals (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 12). This capacity for culture, and the ease with which individuals can identify both with static notions of cultural traits and with the fluidity of changing social identities, allows for the phenomena of ethnic identity and ethnogenesis to occur. The museum visitor moves through exhibits making associations, often unconsciously, in the reproduction of the structure or atmosphere in which they live. 'Structure, in this sense, is not a timeless, abstract entity but a flexible, negotiated, concrete set of relations that is embodied in the social activity of constructing shared understandings and that serves as a program for orienting social action' (Hill 1988: 6). By this continual reproduction of structure, individual identities remain open to change as they are faced with interpretations of themselves and the museum's content.

Through explicit agendas, and by way of implicit connotations derived through individual and museum interpretation, museums provide a structuring mechanism in the formation of social identity. In an increasingly plural society, the visitor who engages with exhibits in a culturally specific museum is likely to increasingly identify with only traces of smaller, more specific ethnic identities, while the more general, encompassing ethnic identity becomes the boundary within which they place their experience and their identity. As Bennett (2006) has argued, in many ways we no longer have a culture; rather, we separate it and can go visit it. As ethnic identity is a performance, that is you 'do' your ethnicity, but you do not 'have' ethnicity, museum visitors may take cues from exhibits that display an identity in which they know they should, for whatever reason, participate. By their particular displays and emphases, museums construct the very possibilities of identity to which visitors may relate.

It must not be forgotten that the museum is also a platform for the construction of notions of identity embraced by board members, curators, exhibit designers, etc. These agents are negotiating their own identities. Therefore, in many cases in the American museum, notions of social identity that are being received by visitors are those formed by exhibitors who are themselves engaged in negotiations of social identity as they wade through concepts of 'us' and 'them'. The authority with which the museum defines and displays these identities in turn defines the sequence of the chain of cultural transmission. At each stage there is a moment of active construction. In this way, we see the creation and solidification of new ethnic identities, both by the museum and through the visitor's personal experience. This framework lends a degree of agency to museums in the formation of ethnic identity that falls outside the typical view of the museum as a reflection of culture rather than actively engaged in cultural construction.

As Sharon Macdonald (2003) pointed out, museums in a contemporary atmosphere of hybrid identities must understand and embrace the fluidity with which social identity is constructed and maintained. By recognizing the museum as structure in the defining and redefining of ethnic identity, the active role that a culturally specific museum plays in the genesis and establishment of new cultural forms becomes apparent. This process occurs as the museum's re-contextualization of items on exhibit and the visitor's engagement with the ethnic identity being portrayed operate to produce several levels of abstraction, redefinition, and solidification of social identities.

From the moment the museum encapsulates via exhibit objects of a particular group, the culture on display is a hybrid, or even hyper-real, version of itself. The group portrayed is represented by an assortment of highlighted objects that the museum has collected, often based upon aesthetic standards. Thus, the cultural traits displayed are, in essence, skimmed off the top of a diverse, fluid mass of identities that may or may not see themselves as bound by some common ground. In larger, survey-type museums, the diverse ethnic groups exhibited are encapsulated as 'blocks of culture'. We see this emergence particularly when one group is presenting the message of another. Yet even when representatives of a source community develop and present a message, that message is intrinsically changed in the process. In the case of culturally specific museums that may fall under broad titles such as 'American Indian' or 'Asian', and in a society that celebrates pluralism, the alteration of social identities often takes the form of concurrent specialization and generalization. This phenomenon would seem to be an oxymoron. Yet as ethnic groups are encapsulated in specified blocks of culture in a celebration of traditional identity, they are simultaneously made more general and accessible to an audience that longs to identify with and perform in reference to these ethnic identities.

The Asian Art Museum, San Francisco is an example of the processes described above. Here, many diverse ethnic identities – Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Korean, etc. – have been encapsulated within one general term and undoubtedly face a future of blurred boundaries as the label is solidified to describe an emergent ethnic identity: Asian. Ethnogenesis acting in and through museum display to foster and strengthen generalized, hybrid identities is not inherently problematic; rather it is to be expected. Active manipulation of social identity, via a feedback loop between individuals, communities, and outsiders, provides the fluidity by which ethnic identity is formed and defined.

### **A Critical Reading of American Indian Representation**

The socio-political atmosphere of the United States as a nation-state, birthed through the domination of diverse groups by a conglomeration of European peoples, presents a particularly interesting context for the display and negotiation of ethnic identities. A widespread process leading to modern nation-states is one where a single ethnic group has risen to control political and economical power and to provide the normative social ideologies (Winkelman 2006: 10). Yet in the United States, rather than domination by a true single ethnic or cultural group, a diverse base of pan-European identities forms the dominant culture. In this context, citizens typically recognize and celebrate diversity as characteristic of the formative period of the United States. This recognition is typically an acceptance in general terms, with only ephemeral references to a diverse past in the composition of an American identity. This ability to move from a diverse past to the formation a modern, united American identity provides the necessary basis for the continued formation and solidification of *other* groups within the nation-state. That is, if there can be such a thing as an all-encompassing *American* ethnic identity, itself once the loose conglomeration of diverse ethnic identities, then it follows logically that there can also be such a thing as a rising *American Indian* identity. American identity then, an ideological oxymoron of singular diversity, acts as the dominant culture against which other ethnic groups are compared. Regardless of conscious intent, this ideological framework forms the contemporary understandings of ethnic identity in the United States and creates the ideal platform for displays of identity that embrace emergent ethnic communities.

In a brief review of three tiers of culturally specific museums:<sup>4</sup> The Huhugam Ki Museum, a local, tribal-run institution, the Heard Museum, a private institution in the southwest targeted to a largely tourist visitorship, and the National Museum of the American Indian, I will show how each imparts a particular message contributing to the formation of social identity. Each presents a specific history, timeline, cultural context, material culture, and message developed in reference to some notion of American Indian identity, but these are produced by museum communities from different perspectives and geared toward a varying range of target communities. In order to compare these contexts, I will ask the following practical questions of these museums: What are the identities being portrayed? What are the aspects of ethnicity emphasized? What cultural elements are being employed in exhibition? What is the underlying message of the form of representation? How is the visitor asked to respond? As stated

previously, it is not my intention to offer in-depth reviews of each museum or their exhibits, but to demonstrate briefly how each institution contributes elements to an emergent American Indian identity.

### **'House of the Ancestors': The Huhugam Ki Museum**

One might argue that a culturally specific museum whose source and museum communities are of the same ethnicity presents the best possibility for an accurate depiction of that group's cultural identity. The Huhugam Ki Museum is by, about, and for the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC) of Southwest Arizona. The SRPMIC is comprised of two American Indian tribes, the Onk Akimel O'Odham (Pima) and Piipaash (Maricopa), who joined together in the early nineteenth century for defensive purposes and who were later bound as one community by a reservation land grant from the United States government in 1879. The museum's mission states that it is 'dedicated to preserving and maintaining the traditional lifestyles of the people'<sup>5</sup>. A visit to the Huhugam Ki Museum requires a drive through the SRPMIC reservation to a building that is not well marked. Non-members must seek out the museum in order to visit it, as the target community is the SRPMIC itself. Under the main sign outside the Huhugam Ki Museum, a smaller plaque reads: 'Dedicated in Honour of Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community Veterans, November 11, 1987'. The air of the museum, therefore, becomes one of memorial and cultural display at once, and the 'House of the Ancestors' is more specifically a house of those ancestors who have served in the United States Armed Forces.

This message of pride by the SRPMIC, an independent sovereign nation, in the service to the dominant culture is juxtaposed with pride in a traditional *lifestyle*. That lifestyle is actually two cultural traditions merged into one hybrid group as a direct result of contact with a burgeoning United States government in the late nineteenth century and the subsequent creation of the reservation system. The solidification of these merged groups as a formal entity is now a defining measure of SRPMIC identity and this hybrid message is carried throughout the museum. Due to its particular history, this community is not easily represented via material culture or artwork without direct reference to the blending of the heritages of two distinct peoples, and subsequently with aspects of the dominant culture. Therefore, though the Huhugam Ki Museum is an example of a local, tribally run museum, its exhibit references generalized notions of American Indian identity and emphasizes involvement with the dominant culture in representing a hybrid history. The only native language used in the museum's label text is in a display of organic elements used to make traditional crafts, which places notions of *being* Pima or Maricopa deep in the past. This notion of remembering the past, but only engaging with it as the past, causes the museum visitor to look elsewhere for the contemporary ethnic identities being portrayed.

The artwork on display predominantly is comprised of contemporary pieces made by SRMIC members and mainly non-traditional in style or subject. A timeline narrative tells the history of the Pima and Maricopa Indians, marking time solely by the dates of interaction between the tribes and the United States government, beginning with the Gadsden Purchase of southern Arizona in 1854. The largest exhibit in the museum, 'Protecting our people, protecting our nation', is a photomontage of every tribe member who has served, or is currently serving, in the United States Armed Forces, starting in the mid-1800s. In these ways, the Huhugam Ki Museum acts less as a tribute to traditional lifestyles as it does a mouthpiece of contemporary ethnic identity. Through the merging of these two distinct tribes into an official, named community, and by displaying the tribes' role within and for the dominant culture in such a positive, proud manner, the museum both displays and actively fosters the emergence of an ethnic identity that is increasingly defined in relation to the dominant culture. The exhibits work together to display to the target community an ethnic identity that has been formed through interaction with and in reference to the United States government. In exhibiting the traditional, the Huhugam Ki places the history and identity of the SRMIC within the context of interactions between the dominant culture and an American Indian identity that rapidly has formed from its original assignation by Christopher Columbus as a misnomer in the fifteenth century to an ethnic identity existing in and of itself in the twenty-first century.

### 'We Are! Arizona': The Heard Museum

The Heard Museum, founded in 1929 by Maie and Dwight B. Heard, has grown in the last 80 years from a special interest personal collection to an internationally recognized art museum that describes itself as 'One of the world's finest destinations for learning about American Indian arts and cultures'.<sup>6</sup> Though many practical changes took place over this time, the original collectors' interest in the indigenous cultures of the Phoenix, Arizona area, continues to frame the Heard Museum's mission. It was not until the 1960s that the Heard Museum expanded its scope of interest to the entire American Southwest, when the board of trustees stated their mission was intended '... to interpret American Indian culture as contemporary and changeable' (Bayes 2000: 57). In the 1990s, the director, Dr Martin Sullivan, re-stated this priority: 'It is important that we preserve and interpret objects, but we also have to preserve and interpret the cultures responsible for creating those objects. Part of our job is to help those cultures sustain themselves' (Bayes 2000: 95). This notion of museum practice directly contributes to the portrayal of ethnic identities in the museum as static blocks of culture that are somehow moving into the future unchanged, which does little to foster engagement with a 'living culture' (Simpson 2007: 235). The general heading 'American Indian' subsumes these cultural blocks and the differences among tribal groups. The clearest example of this is the Heard's *We Are! Arizona* exhibition. Housed in a large, separate gallery within the museum, small, cubicle-like spaces make the room feel tightly packed with individualized 'mini-exhibits'. Each of these cubicles represents a single ethnic group or tribe and offers a brief history, 'characteristic' elements of the group, as well as quotes and messages from current group members. According to Margret Lindauer (2006: 208) this exhibit 'grossly simplifies concepts of identity and difference'. By uniformly approaching each tribe without reference to complexity or the influence of the dominant culture, this exhibit fosters a sense that: 1) these groupings are real and while contemporary, they have a deep history; and 2) these groups share a common, overarching social identity different from the typical visitor, that of the 'American Indian'.

As its target audience is largely comprised of white, European tourists, whose expectations of the American West are often filled with notions of stereotypical Indians, it may be in the Heard Museum's best interest, at least fiscally, to present an oversimplified version of a romanticized 'American West' and its indigenous inhabitants. Diversity is presented under an umbrella of 'Native', and all the connotations of 'American Indians' that follow. The tension of portraying these blocks of past culture alongside and underneath an overarching notion of 'American Indian Art' undermines any notion of distinct cultures, but rather reifies a 'American Indian' as an emerging ethnic identity in and of itself, one that is able to encompass and subsume the diversity represented within. The exhibit then asks the visitor to either relate to this ethnic identity as a member of the group portrayed, or to negotiate an alternate ethnic identity in response.

### ***The NMAI: (Re)Presenting or (Re)Defining?***

These issues of representing, preserving, and defining ethnic identities are not exclusive to local or regional museums. To review the role of American Indian identity at a national level, I will discuss briefly the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). As a component of the Smithsonian Institution, the NMAI self-identifies as the largest state-sponsored voice for the curation and display of American Indian artefacts, objects, and associated exhibits. Opened in 1989, the NMAI is predominantly an American Indian undertaking and purports to exist as a conduit and resource for native voices.<sup>7</sup> Following relocation from New York City to Washington D.C. in 2004 and a grand re-opening, the NMAI gained more public prominence and influence as a national authority on American Indian cultures. As evidenced by the recent lecture series, '(Re)Presenting America: The Evolution of Culturally Specific Museums'<sup>8</sup> to be held at the NMAI, national museum staff are aware that their role is 'representation' of sorts, but representing whom? And in what ways? The NMAI is physically and ideologically situated in an odd space, as it attempts to 'reconcile indigenous sovereignty with patriotic nationalism' (Bloom 2005: 329). As a result, though the NMAI is arguably aware of the issues involved with representation of diverse peoples, in many ways it confronts them by directly diminishing diversity and fostering the development of a national, homogenized identity for all the nation's indigenous peoples. In this way, the exhibits at the NMAI skim the most 'indigenous',

'characteristic' traits from diverse cultures originating from across 3.79 million square miles and display these in units that cooperate to comprise a grand, American Indian identity.

Allison Arieff has pointed out that the 'illusion of representation' at the NMAI results in museum visitors engaging with a unified present and an 'American Indian identity' that, at this point, has little meaning (Arieff 1995: 78). Further, she argues that the 'the NMAI's rhetoric would seem to advance the notion of a generic or "normal" Indian...homogenizing an inherently heterogeneous group of people in the process' (Arieff 1995: 81). The museum ignores difficult issues of the past in favour of emphasizing this sweeping native identity.<sup>9</sup> The opening short film, to which visitors are initially directed, entitled *Who We Are*, is purportedly introducing the diversity of indigenous peoples. Underlying this display of diversity, however, is the capitalized *We*, which in many ways will become the take-home message for visitors. That is, diversity may be discussed and even celebrated, but the umbrella under which it is defined presents a message of unity in diversity that American visitors likely do not even pause to question.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusions: Lessons from Comparison and Museum Applications**

The brief examples from the Huhugam Ki, Heard, and National Museum of the American Indian presented here demonstrate the role of the museum in the development, solidification, and perpetuation of social identities, particularly ethnic identity. Specifically, I argue that the museum's role in contemporary ethnogenesis is seen in the various ways in which the museums discussed here interact with the past and engage the present. The Huhugam Ki Museum displays seemingly little interest in relating to the community any sense of distinct heritage. Rather, an ethnic identity forged in relationship to a dominant culture is displayed that appeals to a generalized notion of what it means to be American Indian. While endeavouring to teach their community about 'traditional lifestyles', the Huhugam Ki Museum succeeds more in providing the visitor with a clear view of the emergence of a contemporary SRPMIC ethnic identity nested in its reference to the dominant culture.

The Heard Museum's grouping of the SRPMIC alongside many other groups of southwest indigenous peoples under the broad heading 'American Indian' also contributes to this increasing emergence of a convergent ethnic identity. The Heard Museum restructures divergent native groups as 'American Indian', and fosters a sense of 'American Indian Art' as a reality, an aspect of art history that has arisen only in the last century (Berlo 1992). By contributing to this stage of ethnogenesis that moves beyond plural alliances with individually recognizable elements and toward the fostering of 'American Indian' as an ethnic identity, the Heard Museum actually plays a very similar role to the Huhugam Ki Museum in the creation and negotiation of social identity on the part of the visitor.

Finally, the National Museum of the American Indian brings these processes to light on a national scale, and in many ways provides the clearest picture of contemporary ethnogenesis in the United States in its most solidified state. The very notion of a national museum encompassing and defining an American Indian identity lends an official stamp of recognizance to this conglomerate ethnic identity. Unlike the Heard's portrayal of an American Southwestern indigenous experience, the NMAI asks the visitor to recognize an overarching, all-encompassing social experience contributing to the notion that American Indians may be, in many ways, thought of as 'one'. The museum may offer diverse exhibits, nuanced histories, and the subtle recognizance of unique past experiences, but when the visitor leaves the museum and visits a gift shop where he or she may purchase an 'Indian Tomahawk' as a token of remembrance, that remembrance will be tied to an over-arching definition of American Indian identity.

Ethnogenesis, specifically as it operates in museum practice in the United States, functions within the bounds of a nation-state that is attempting to move beyond colonial values. In this context, remnants of racist thought and notions that ethnic differences are underlined by biological difference have often stymied this movement. In any cultural or national context, it is difficult to think about difference without imposing hierarchy (Moore 1994), and even blatant rejections of racial hierarchy do not necessarily entail rejections of cultural hierarchy (Dias 2008). National museums in the United States that are culturally specific retain the air of a dominant culture providing representation of their minority constituents in an odd simultaneous display of homogenization and the celebration of diversity. At the same time, not-quite-post-



colonialist feelings of guilt and responsibility must either be dealt with head-on (an unlikely possibility), or must present through the museum a therapeutic sense of celebration in a pristine, primitive past and a modernizing, civilizing, inclusive dominant culture. In the creation of an American Indian identity, 'the NMAI purports to celebrate contemporary Indians but can only do so by inextricably linking them to a glorified (and constructed) primitive past' (Arieff 1995: 84). This past is easier to construct if the diverse, individual communities affected by colonialism are placed under an umbrella of generalized identity.

The argument here does not suggest the inevitable conglomeration of diverse identities into a single, unified conglomerate of 'American' identity. Identities are fluid and individual, as much as they are influenced by and contribute to social structure. The very nature of ethnic identity as a differentiation of an 'us' from a 'them' is a key component in the multi-dimensional structure of an individual's social identity. 'This [differentiation] is one reason why ethnicities—including new, hybrid ethnicities—keep being articulated and rearticulated as people form themselves into identity groupings in their quest for a sense of belonging in an insecure, rapidly changing world' (Ang 2011: 29). Further, this process should not be viewed as inherently negative or as somehow an injustice to the diversity of cultures encapsulated under broad identifiers. Rather, it is much more utilitarian for museums to recognize the role they play in the active display and transformation of social identities and the ways in which the visitor engages with exhibits. For, as Perin (1992: 183) has noted, 'exhibitions' messages are as much constructed by audiences' interpretations as by curators' and designers' intentions'.

Culturally specific museums organized by source communities such as the Huhugam Ki museum demonstrate that this process of ethnogenesis is not one that can be imposed on diverse communities. Rather, there is some social, psychological, or historical benefit to the increasing identification by young adults in the United States with these broader ethnic identities. Perhaps it is as Lawlor (2006: 4) suggests: 'essentialism lends cultural stability where instability threatens and demarcates a place for the community at issue to stand, so to speak, in the process of negotiating with more powerful others'. Whatever the underlying reasons for the emergence of these ethnic identities, if museums recognize the ways in which visitors are personally connecting to exhibits, and the ways in which they are more and more unlikely to connect, exhibits can be tailored to reach a broader audience, and appeals for funding may be made to a wider base. Museums in any national context are simultaneously a mirror of an increasingly globalized society, as well as a structuring agent with which individuals interact in the development of their own identity, and the role of the culturally specific museum in contemporary ethnogenesis is one that should be taken carefully into consideration.

Received: 26 January 2013

Finally Accepted: 3 December 2013

## Notes

- 1 Washington, J. (2011) 'Some Asians' College Strategy: Don't Check Asian', <<http://news.yahoo.com/asians-college-strategy-dont-check-asian-174442977.html>>, accessed 3 December 2011.
- 2 Increasing involvement of American Indian communities in museum exhibit development and implementation is a rising topic of interest in museum studies. See, for example and further references, Lonetree, A. (2012) *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. I offer up this study as a start to the employment of a new theoretical framework and look forward to other scholars continuing to examine the ways in which museums and museum representations contribute to the construction of all forms of identity, collective and otherwise.
- 3 Neither term currently is considered more politically or socially correct, or even more common, than the other in the United States. Each term carries its own suite of connotations and associations, and the term 'American Indian' is used in this paper simply for cohesion of thought following the example of similar publications on the topic, the National Museum

of the American Indian, and the official use of the term historically by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the United States Census Bureau.

- <sup>4</sup> The museums and exhibits discussed here should not be read as prime or typical examples of each tier of culturally specific museum, but are included in order to demonstrate that the process of ethnogenesis is not confined to any one level of museum. There are many types of tribal community museums with varying emphases on interactions with the United States government, and the Huhugam Ki example was included as an interesting singular example of one tribe's interaction with and perspective of the dominant culture. Finally, this study does not seek to criticize these exhibits or museums, but to note their common themes within the framework of a particular theoretical construct.
- <sup>5</sup> As stated in the 2012 Huhugam Ki Museum informational brochure.
- <sup>6</sup> As stated on the Heard Museum website (<http://www.heard.org/about/index.html>), 2012.
- <sup>7</sup> As stated on the NMAI website (<http://nmai.si.edu/about/>), 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> As stated on the NMAI website ([http://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/seminars-symposia/\(Re\)PresentingAmerica-Program.pdf](http://nmai.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/seminars-symposia/(Re)PresentingAmerica-Program.pdf)), 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> Muir, D. (2005) 'National Myth of the American Indian' *Free Republic*, <<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1358787/posts>>, accessed 4 March 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> It is fundamentally beneficial to a nation-state of not-quite-post-colonialist thinkers to provide this vision of Native-Americans, African-Americans, European-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc. For while comfortable with, and even celebratory of diversity, the generalization of many diverse ethnic identities is conceived of and unified into a cohesive nation-state when these larger pan-ethnic identities are portrayed and celebrated as reality. Appealing to an 'Asian-American' voter base is much more manageable and conducive to campaigning than appealing to a Korean-American base. According to the United States Census Bureau (Grieco and Cassidy: 2001), 'Asian' is a possible choice for the 'race' category. This type of broad, all-encompassing race category is typical of the possible identifications on the census form. Ethnic identity, aside from noting 'Hispanic or Latino' or 'Not Hispanic or Latino', is not an option. The Bureau considers race and ethnicity to be essentially the same markers, while acknowledging that most U.S. citizens do not. This is not to say that these smaller, diverse identities have ceased to exist among individuals, rather the argument here is that museums and government entities alike increasingly mobilize and concretize these larger ethnic identities and actively contribute to their solidification as new ethnic identities.

## Acknowledgements

I owe an immense deal of gratitude to Dr. Richard Toon, Associate Research Professor and Director of Museum Studies at Arizona State University. His teaching, guidance, and patient instruction and commentary through the formation of these ideas (and their subsequent revisions!) greatly influenced the development and expression of these concepts, and I cannot thank him enough for the time he put into my instruction and the development of this paper. I would also like to thank my professors and colleagues in the CBR, ASU, for their introduction to and continuing instruction in notions of social identity.

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