The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics

Caro, M.A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 4

Infelicitous Sites of Exhibition: The Nostalgic Space of the Museum

With the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space. . . . The primacy of the economic and above all the political implies the supremacy of space over time.
—Henri Lefebvre (95)

The space of the museum can be described as an always already nostalgic site, a space in which a narrative of a past that never was is constructed, a past needed by museumgoers in the present. These stories often invoke a collective past, one of the requirements of the formation and affirmation of a nationalist ideology, as described by Benedict Anderson in his Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. He refers to the museum as an institution of power, a site whose function is the “systemic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology . . .” (163).

Objects in museums are de-contextualized, severed from their original sites but exhibited in a way such that their displacement is not highlighted. Their existence in the here and now, among the disparate collection of other objects in the museum, is de-emphasized so that they can fit within a constructed narrative by which they reify history, indexing another place and time. In this way Lefebvre’s description of modernity’s tendency to privilege space over time, quoted in the epigraph above, is an apt description of many of the processes that take place within the museum. Within the site of the museum, time becomes space; objects become markers of temporality as the visitor traverses through time by navigating the space of the museum. A chronological narrative unfolds as one walks through the museum, the floor plan providing the basic rubrics for the telling of a story. This, at least, is true for the large encyclopedic museums that attempt to tell grand stories about the nation within a global context.
The nostalgic narrative of the museum reconstructs the authenticity of the past while suspending the presence of the present. It is a nostalgic narrative by which, as Susan Stewart describes, “the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative” (23). In this chapter, I consider the spatial relationship of the museum itself to its surroundings in order to evaluate how that relationship informs the story told inside. I will argue that contemporary Native engagements with the museum—whether as a site where Native culture is put on display by and for non-Natives or as a venue for Native self-representation—cannot be understood without a critical approach that takes into account the museum as locus.

This approach emphasizes the site specificity of the museum and seeks to reposition this institution within an epistemological framework that is inclusive of Native perspectives. By focusing on the location of the museum—its geographic and ideological placement not only within a national but also within a global context—it becomes clear that, although the site of exhibition may be fixed to a particular place, the museum’s position within discourses that attempt to define Indigeneity, such as art history and anthropology, is never stable. The role of the museum in legitimating historical narratives makes it the proper place for the telling of these stories, the place where specific narratives about the other are deemed felicitous. And it is not only the space contained by the museum that allows this propriety, but also the place occupied by the museum itself. By re-cognizing the (in)appropriateness of the museum’s location, one can consider its nostalgic function—whether as a site for the infelicitous display of other cultures in the West or as the proper place for housing communal treasures within tribal museums.

The engagements with the museum that I will address depend on considering the museum as a performative site where artists, historians, curators, and visitors locate themselves vis-à-vis narratives of (re)location. In this instance, the term “location” can refer either to the process of placing or to the place itself. I am interested here in the “location of the Native” in the museum—in both the sense of a place that is saved for, occupied, or abandoned by the Native and as the performance of such (dis)locations. Therefore, I will pay attention to the
production and consumption of indigenous cultures, and particularly the representation of the Native body, within the museum in order to note how that economy extends beyond the museum's walls into a transnational cultural economy.

**Naming as Possessing**

Six Arawak Natives survived as captives aboard Columbus's ship on his return from his first voyage to the Western hemisphere in 1493. It is not clear why Columbus abducted these “New World” Natives. Cultural critic and literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov suggests that it was Columbus’s “naturalist’s enthusiasm” that drove his impulse to collect them as specimens: “[H]e always wants to take specimens of all kinds back to Spain: trees, birds, animals, and Indians” (48).¹

Columbus’s taxonomic practices also included the cataloguing and display of his collection. On his arrival in Spain, the captured Natives were re-named; they were baptized and given Christian names (28). The historian Samuel Morison briefly describes what must have been a dramatic spectacle:

Unique and memorable was the ceremony of baptizing the six Indians. King, Queen and Infante D. Juan acted as godparents; to the Indian first in rank, a relation of the cacique Guacangari, they gave the name Fernando de Aragon; to another, Don Juan de Castilla, and to a third (the clever interpreter), Don Diego Colón. (1942 360)²

Although a detailed description of this event does not survive, there is no doubt that it must have been a well-choreographed production of a Christian ritual performed in order to save the Natives’ souls. The public spectacle also served other functions, including the demonstration of the crown’s power over the lands

---

¹ Another suggestion is that he wanted to bring the natives to Spain to learn Castilian in order that they would be brought back to America to function as interpreters (Greenblatt 1991107). He may also have wanted to demonstrate the susceptibility of Indians to being converted to Catholicism (Todorov 43). On his second voyage, Columbus brought back five hundred and fifty natives, of whom approximately three hundred and fifty survived, in order to endorse their usefulness as slaves (Todorov 46-49 and Greenblatt 1991 71-72).

² Greenblatt recounts that Don Diego Colón was named after Columbus’s eldest son (1991 83).
the Natives metonymically represented.³

The process of naming, or, rather, renaming, the Natives also served the function of appropriating the signifiers of the “New World” within a Western epistemology. Todorov discusses Columbus’s obsession with renaming all that came within his view during his first voyage: “Like Adam in the midst of Eden, Columbus is profoundly concerned with the choice of names for the virgin world before his eyes” (27). Despite the fact that the indigenous people he encountered taught him many of the Native names for the various places, plants, animals, and Natives he encounters, Columbus insists on replacing these names with those of his own choosing. Literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt describes Columbus’s acts of renaming, these baptisms, as speech acts: utterances that perform rather than describe an act (1991 54). The act of naming is a process of branding; as Todorov states: “nomination is equivalent to taking possession” (127). This, of course, is the case from the perspective of the one doing the naming. From the Natives’ perspective, this may have been interpreted as an inability or unwillingness to engage them on, and with, their own terms.⁴

Strictly speaking, speech acts must be performed within a specific context in order for them to have the prescribed effect. According to the philosopher J.L. Austin, “it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate . . .” He goes on to say that

³ On the state’s use of the spectacle, see Foucault, Discipline and Punish.

⁴ The notion of speech acts was developed by J.L. Austin in How to Do Things with Words. He states that to utter a performative sentence “is not to describe my doing . . . it is to do it” (6).

Native names have been used as an art medium by the controversial German artist Lothar Baumgarten. For a sympathetic overview of Baumgarten’s project, see Craig Owens, “Improper Names.” Owens sees Baumgarten’s project as indicating, “the limits of the European project of visualizing the Other” (295-6). However, he is also aware of some of the risks of Baumgarten’s project, which include the danger that “in presenting this material—the knowledge of the Indians—he is simply providing the raw material out of which ethnographers, folklorists, and specialists in Indian dialects will produce still more knowledge about the Indians” (295). Owens fails to see Baumgarten as already being one of those processing Indigenous knowledge as a product for Western consumption. His artwork is anything but “raw material.” For a more critical approach to Baumgarten’s work, see the discussion of the response by Robert Houle (Saulteaux/Ojibwe) and Greg Staats (Mohawk) in the following chapter.
it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform certain other actions whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering other words” (8). Performative speech acts need to follow an accepted protocol in order to accomplish their deeds. The consequence of a speech act that is performed inappropriately is considered an infelicity. This does not mean that the act is void and has no effect; it does, however, make it an act that has not performed its intended task, an act that has gone awry (8). (Columbus’s proclamation of having arrived in India, for example, was a most infelicitous act with substantial consequences.) Austin is also explicit in expanding the notion of infelicity beyond speech to include all acts: “Infelicity is an ill to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all conventional acts” (19). In fact, the idea of the performative—which in How to Do Things with Words he specifically applies to speech—is to be understood to apply to any act that has significance based on prescribed practice.

Returning to the christening of Arawaks, it could be argued that these speech acts were correctly performed under the proper circumstances. It is even possible that, in terms of church doctrine, the Natives had by then decided to convert to Catholicism and were willing participants in the ceremony. However, the act of renaming the six Natives would be considered an infelicity if, for example, they did not understand the implications of the ceremony or if they participated under duress. What I would like to consider with this example is that the taxonomic processes followed by Columbus—the collecting, cataloguing, and display of objects and people of the “New World”—comprised a series of interrelated steps that could be said to constitute an exhibitionary practice. There is a logic that guided his selection of specimens, which also informs the ways in which these specimens were organized, and, finally, arranged for exhibition.

The history of exhibitions has been the focus of much recent scholarly attention, particularly that given to the ideological implications of the practices of display and viewing that take place within the museum. Tracing the development of the museum, from the private collections full of wondrous curiosities to the public museums displaying materials forming part of a national patrimony,
the emphasis of these scholarly writings has often been on the relationship between objects and the spaces they occupy, between specimens and the sites used to display them.  

The practice of curating is particularly engaged with the narrative aspects of this relationship. The story told by the placement of objects, ordered within an architectural frame so that viewers are prompted to perform a specific sequence of readings, somatically inserts viewers within the prescribed narrative. In fact, the performance of these narratives within these specialized spaces has been compared to that of a ritual. Carol Duncan has argued that instead of seeing art museums “either as collections of things or as distinctive works of architecture . . . [they should be seen as forming a totality] best understood as a ritual setting, a ceremonial monument in its own right and not just a container for other monuments” (1995 10).

In Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis, Mieke Bal focuses on the acts of exposition performed within the museum, on “gestures of showing [that] can be considered discursive acts, best considered as (or analogous to) specific speech acts” (3). She is interested in analyzing how the work of exhibition within museums conflates presentation as explanation, how, in linguistic terms, the demonstrative comes to operate as constative. As she puts it, the visitor is

---

5 Much has been published on museums, particularly during the last decade or so. A selection of important anthologies includes: Karp and Levine, Exhibiting Cultures; Cooke and Wollen, Visual Display; MacDonald and Fyte, Theorizing Museums; Boswell and Evans, Representing the Nation. “Museum Meanings,” a series by Routledge includes: Barringer and Flynn, Colonialism and the Object; Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture; and Kreps, Liberating Culture. Work that is explicitly dedicated to the display of Native cultures includes: West, The Changing Presentation of the American Indian; Museums and Native Cultures; Jessup and Bagg, On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery; Clavir, Preserving What Is Valued; Peers and Brown, Museums and Source Communities.

On the history of the museum, see Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum; Crimp, On the Museum’s Ruins; and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture.

6 It is important to keep in mind that since the nineteenth century, the pedagogical approach to conveying the museum’s message has primarily emphasized an autodidactic engagement with objects in the form of the self-guided tour (Bennett, passim). However, there have been several art projects, such as the work of Andrea Fraser, that work to subvert these didactic models.
shown an object—“Look!”—and then told about it—“That’s how it is” (2).

However, this “show and tell” process is no simple grade school exercise. There is a complex semiotics at play in which the relationship between the object on display (signifier) is conflated with its narrative explanation (signified). While the relationship between signifier and signified is by definition not fixed, and allows for play between a thing and its meaning, the expository nature of museum exhibition attempts to regulate and constrain that play. As Bal states: “The thing on display comes to stand for . . . the statement about it. . . . The space between thing and statement is filled up” (4). The showing and telling become one.

Bal goes on to explain how the fixing of meaning by traditional exhibitory practices within museums depends on the presence of the objects, which work to reify these discourses. The undeniable presence of the object entices viewers to read the museum’s narrative as truth. (5) It is this positivist approach that has been extremely effective in narrating truths about Native peoples, particularly when these narratives are based on the exhibition of cultural objects, and especially when they involve the presence of Native bodies as objects.

The complex integration of objects, space, and viewer within the narrative structure of an exhibition demands a careful choreography, regardless of the museum’s mission. However, the meaning intended by the established sequence that structures these narratives is always at risk of an inept, or even subversive, performance. This is particularly true of those narratives based on notions of progressive development, teleological stories ultimately fulfilled when the viewer exits the museum to a (post)modern present. The beginning of the narrative, however, requires a transition for the visitor into the temporalized space of the museum. Museums often make this transition explicit by proving a transformative experience that marks the transition from outside to inside, a transformative experience demarcating the outside world from the carefully staged simulation within. The contrast between the world within and that beyond the museum’s walls prompts an analysis of the artificiality of both spaces.

The process of negotiating the artifice of place has provided opportunities for artists to disrupt the intended narrative of museums. Most often, these inter-
ventions have taken the form of performance art, which makes sense if we continue to analyze this space within the speech-act framework outlined by Bal. In museums, visitors are encouraged to traverse space in a performance that endorses the narratives of power scripted for them by museum professionals. These authorized narratives are site-specific, which makes them vulnerable to counter-narratives produced and performed at these sites by enacting what Austin would call infelicitous acts.

Enacting Infelicities

The didactic narratives scripted by museums have been the focus of artists for some time. The criticism of art institutions are part of an art practice that has come to be defined as "institutional critique." In her analysis of the history of these practices, Kirsi Peltomäki defines them as "art practices that, since the late 1960s, have called attention to their institutional framing" (2001 2). A notable example is the work of Fred Wilson, which has focused on highlighting the racist ideology that is intrinsic to most museums. He developed one of his early projects, an exhibition titled Mining the Museum, in 1992 for the Maryland Historical Society and the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore. The exhibition was an installation that featured work from the museum's own permanent collection, which Wilson arranged in contexts that highlighted the history of racial oppression not often addressed by the museum. An instance of the kinds of tensions Wilson highlighted is seen in one of the displays that features two drastically different types of metalwork (Figure 24). In the same vitrine, Wilson has placed an ornate set of silver vessels, delicately smithed in the Baltimore Repousseé Style, alongside, or rather surrounding, a set of coarsely produced and rusted slave shackles. Although the works are contemporaneous, the disparity of their function and aesthetics reveals what would not necessarily be part of the Maryland Historical Society's curatorial practice: an exhibition highlighting the history of slavery that allowed for the accumulated wealth represented by the fine silver vessels.
This installation depended on the viewer's ability to recognize the infelicitous placement of the objects. It relied on making explicit the often implicit nature of exhibiting the dominating culture. The complicity of an institution such as the Maryland Historical Society in maintaining narratives of European dominance, in naturalizing these colonial discourses, become most visible when the display includes Native bodies.  

An example of an artistic endeavor to enact infelicities based on the representation of the Native body within the site of exhibition is a performance by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña titled Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . . (1992-1993). Fusco, who is Cuban American, and Gómez-Peña, who was born in Mexico and lives in the U.S., first performed this work at Columbus Plaza in Madrid in 1992 as part of the quincentennial celebrations of Columbus's arrival in the Americas.  

---

7 Roland Barthes has described the process of naturalizing the cultural as myth. As he explains: “myth consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural’” (Barthes 1977 165).

8 For a detailed account of preparations for and responses to the performance, see Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance.”
By bringing this performance back to “the origin” of the West’s colonization of the Americas, the artists intended to “create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other” (Fusco 1995 37). For the performance, they dressed in costumes that included typical Western wear, such as tennis shoes and a wrestling mask, but also had elements of stereotypical “primitive” garments, such as a grass skirt and a feather headdress (Figure 25). They spent their time in a cage doing mundane things associated with Western culture, such as watching television and working on a laptop, while also performing “traditional” dances and other pseudo-ceremonial acts. They were aided in their presentation by assistants who posed as docents and by informational panels that described their newly discovered homeland of “Guatinau,” which they claimed was located somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico.

Figure 25. Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña performing Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . . , Columbus Plaza, Madrid, 1992.

The sites of their performances included Covent Garden in London, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, the Australian Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the Whitney Museum in New York. An unexpected effect of the performance was that a large number of viewers failed to see the artifice in the work and instead believed the satire to be an actual exposition of Native peoples. Thus, by attempting to have viewers recognize the im-
propriety of the display of Native people as specimens, the performance, instead, was perceived as proper, as the kind of exhibit expected at such venues. Not unlike Duchamp’s display of a urinal within an art gallery, which transformed a commercial piece of plumbing into a work of fine art, the various museum settings for the Fusco and Gómez-Peña performance legitimized their farce as fact according to the mandate of each space.

This shift in intended infelicities—from exposing the inadequacy of the museum as presenter of culture to the failure of the viewer to respond with the appropriate disbelief—is the focus of The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey, the video produced to document the performance. The documentary emphasizes the responses of viewers, particularly those who have “misread” the performance. They are shown asking questions about the Guatinauis based on their preconceptions of “primitive cultures” as well as on the information provided by the museum and the artists. While the documentary provides a historical overview of the display of Natives, the most striking images are of museum visitors who appear to lack the appropriate critical engagement with the art performance. Fusco discusses critics who chastised the artists for “the ‘immoral’ act of duping our audiences” and wonders “why they [the critics] seem to have forgotten the tradition of site-specific performance . . .” As Fusco explains, the Whitney was “the only site where we were recognizably contextualized as artwork” (Fusco 1995 54, 39)

Whereas the recognition of the infelicity enacted by Wilson was based on the ability of the viewer to read the impropriety of his proposed counter-narrative—on reading the artist’s intervention to the storyline established by the Maryland Historical Society—the ultimate focus of the Fusco and Gómez-Peña performance was on the viewers themselves. They became a crucial part of the process of deconstructing the museum’s narrative. Therefore, it is important to note the site-specificity of the performance. There was a great difference between seeing the work in New York as part of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, a highly controversial show whose focus was on issues of identity and representation, and seeing the piece performed within the various ethnographic venues spaces
whose histories includes exactly this kind of display of living specimens. The performance focused on the naïve audience response, on their infelicitous response to a performance that had been approved by the museum as an appropriate critique of its own legacy of ethnographic narratives that objectify the other. This revised auto-critical narrative, however, did not lead viewers to collaborate in the consumption of this send-up of a nostalgic view of Native cultures, but, instead, revealed the persistence of racist readings still invoked by these institutions.

A much earlier example of a performance that approached the issue of the display of the Native body in the museum is The Artifact Piece by the Native artist James Luna (Luiseño, Diegueño), which was first performed in 1987 at the Museum of Man in San Diego (Figure 26). In this well-known work, the artist placed himself in a display case and lay on his back with his eyes closed, surrounded by objects that identified him as an individual, a subject rather than an object typifying a tribe, a Native specimen. These objects included cassettes of his favorite music, poetry by Allan Ginsberg, family photographs, his divorce papers, and his Master’s degree in counseling. Unlike the Fusco and Gómez-Peña performance, Luna’s presentation confronts viewers’ expectations by making his presence as particular and individualistic as possible. Instead of representing a stereotype of the other caught in the past, Luna attempted to connect with his audience in terms of common contemporary individual experiences. He explains that:

As an artist, I want to speak as a whole, not to talk about how Indian I am, or to make Indian art for Indians or collectors or admirers. I want to speak to all of you, everyone who was also born in front of a TV. I want to speak to you as a whole person, and to bring along my cultural side as well.

(2004 150)

By seeking to have the viewer identify with his personal history, Luna invites a sympathetic reception of his placement as an object within the museum, which

---

then leads the viewer to recognize the impropriety of such an exhibition. Luna recounts that “a couple of times after my performance, non-Native men would come over and say, ‘That was me in there, man’” (150).

![Figure 26. James Luna, (Luiseño/Diegueño), Artifact Piece was first staged in 1987 at the Museum of Man, San Diego.](image)

As with The Couple in the Cage, Luna’s performance was subsequently presented at an art venue, as part of The Decade Show in 1990. The show took place at several spaces throughout New York City and was in many ways a precursor to the 1993 Whitney Biennial. It featured many of the same artists and also focused on issues of multiculturalism and the production of identity. The nature of the venue, however, changed the reception of Luna’s work. Unlike the opportunity presented at the ethnographic museum for viewers to identify with him, the site of the art museum made visitors acutely aware of Luna’s role as perfor-

---

10 Both The Decade Show in 1990 and the Whitney Biennial of 1993 were the focus of much criticism. As Jean Fisher commented, “The inclusion of ‘ethnic’ artists in such shows . . . suggest that ‘multiculturalism’ is a new variant of ‘assimilation’—a means by which the mainstream incorporates diverse cultural perspectives, without essentially relinquishing control” (Jean Fisher 2002, 333). These sorts of criticisms, however, overly emphasized the agency of curators and did not account for the negotiated nature of organizing these large exhibitions. Although power inequality between artist and institution at such shows is inevitable, these institutions are forced, as part of the process of collaboration, to acquiesce a certain amount of control.
mer, as an avant-garde artist presenting work whose aesthetic value was being highlighted. The possibility of Luna returning their gaze, of opening his eyes as they stared at his body laid out as if dead, made the visual consumption of his body as object untenable. As Jean Fisher has described it, “the shock of his real presence and the possibility that he may indeed be watching and listening disarms the voyeuristic gaze and denies it its structuring power” (2002 337). It is important to consider that the infelicity enacted in the art museum by Luna’s performance depends, to some extent, on the viewer’s recognition of the improper siting of the work. The Whitney was the wrong place to view Indian bodies as such, dead or alive.\

It is also important to realize that these kinds of institutional critiques are not altogether antagonistic, but, instead, are often collaborative engagements with these sites of cultural exhibition. Museums have been willing participants, at times commissioning the artists to “ misuse” their institutions. In an article by Andrea Fraser, one of the leading practitioners of institutional critique whose early work focused on museums, she reminds us that these critiques are not necessarily a hostile encounter between artist and institution. These are not instances in which the visitor’s role is merely that of a witnessing bystander. Fraser insists that: “We are the institution.” She explains that the viewer is not merely inculcated by institutions but is, in fact, a constitutive agent of these sites as institutions. Fraser elaborates:

It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to. Because the institution of art is internalized, embodied, and performed by individuals, these are the questions that institutional critique demands we ask, above all, of ourselves. (279)

Therefore, as with all performance, the viewer is a collaborator in the signifying

\[11\] For an illuminating analysis of the differences in rhetorical strategies between ethnographic museums and museums of art, which reinforce the nature/culture binary, see Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off,” (Double Exposures 13-56). For a self-conscious discussion of a project critical of the ethnographic museum, which involved not only art production but also curation, see McMaster, “Creating Spaces” (Ferguson and Nairne 191-200).
process of the work. In terms of the work of institutional critique, the visitor is pressured to locate themselves vis-à-vis the institution, to recognize and admit their role in the production of museum narratives.

The performances I have used as examples highlight the expository practices of museum display and their appropriateness to place. Wilson’s curating as performance exposes the racial myths, which have been naturalized within the museum space, by a process of juxtaposing objects that makes visible the often invisible hand of the curator. More blatant disruptions were enacted by Luna, Fusco, and Gómez-Peña in their use of the body to engage viewers within these thickly coded spaces. These performances draw attention to the management of objects within the space of the museum, to the intimate relations between architecture and curating.

**Essential Sites**

I have been discussing the museum as a site prone to, or ripe for, infelicities, some enacted in collaboration with the institution, others subversively introduced. I have also focused on the propriety of the museum space, the museum as a place specifically produced to contain those narratives proper to itself, whether primarily aesthetic, ethnographic, scientific, or historical. I would now like to consider the location of the museum, its geographic context, in order to think about the placement of the museum as itself providing the potential for the disjuncturing of intended narratives.

Before they are constructed, the placement of such institutions is carefully considered by a range of experts, from architects to city planners, who take into account many variables—the building’s aesthetic relationship to other structures nearby, access to transportation, commercial impact, conservation capabilities, and other logistical factors. Their concern is often with how feasible these structures will be within a region’s infrastructure. What I would like to consider, however, is how the location of a museum, its various relationships to its surroundings, informs and limits the possible narratives produced within. I want to think about the significance of a museum’s siting, what I will refer to as its site-specificity, as a contributing factor to a visitor’s (in)felicitous engagement.
The issue of site-specificity as it relates to art production was the focus of a chapter in Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins*, titled “Redefining Site Specificity.” In this essay, he traces a shift between a minimalist approach to site-specificity, in which “the coordinates of perception were established as existing . . . among spectator, artwork, and the place inhabited by both,” and a later approach that emphasized the political ramifications of this triangulation. Crimp notes that the relationships established by such an art practice attempt to “reveal the material conditions of the work of art, its mode of production and reception, the institutional supports of its circulation, [and] the power relations represented by these institutions . . .” (1993 154, 153). The increase in the social significance of site-specificity has various ramifications for art practices whose address is toward whole communities and not just individual(ized) viewers.

An analysis that takes up this materialist engagement with site-specificity is a study by Miwon Kwon titled *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. The book theorizes the siting of art as a "spatio-political problematic" and the “nexus between the subject/object and location" (2, 8). Kwon’s analysis eventually centers on the possibilities for site-specific work not only to engage but to produce communities. It is this part of her discussion that I find useful for my discussion of the significance of the museum’s siting to a visitor’s experience. Although these notions of site-specificity focus on the production of art, I would like to apply them to a discussion of the relationship among visitor, museum, and the place of this engagement in order to consider how this dynamic works to reaffirm identity.

Kwon states that her goal is to theorize a new model of belonging-in-transience by “countering both the nostalgic desire for a retrieval of rooted, place-bound identities on the one hand, and the antinostalgic embrace of a nomadic fluidity of subjectivity, identity, and spatiality on the other . . .” (Kwon 2002, 2, 8). While she is mainly addressing issues that pertain to art produced in an urban setting—which often involve negotiations between the artist, community, and art institution—her discussion raises important issues in terms of the negotiations between viewer, museum, and communities, that I want to emphasize as being formative of identity. The most applicable of her insights for my project is
her discussion of the location and production of community, of community as a site.

One of Kwon’s main concerns is the possibility that the production of art that purports to engage a particular community’s concerns will reify, and therefore commodify, that community. Her deconstruction of the concept of community criticizes what she characterizes as the essentialist production of space, a space occupied by “authentic” communities. As she states:

> It seems historically inevitable that we will leave behind the nostalgic notion of a site and identity as essentially bound to the physical actualities of a place. Such a notion, if not ideologically suspect, is at least out of sync with the prevalent description of contemporary life as a network of unanchored flows. (2002 164)

Kwon’s analysis leads her to the conclusion that, “Reckoning with the impossibility of community . . . may be the only way to imagine past the burden of affirmational siting of community to its critical unsiting” (155).

The irony of Kwon’s project—to think “beyond and through the impossibility of community” (154)—is that, in terms of Native identity, “the notion of site and identity as essentially bound to the physical actualities of a place” is precisely the belief often advocated by those looking to maintain homelands or regain territories taken away by force.

Kwon bases her ideas of community on an approach outlined by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who insists that “only a community that questions its own legitimacy is legitimate,” a productive contradiction that he calls an “inoperative community” (Kwon 2002 155). Nancy’s, and, in turn, Kwon’s, suspicion of claims for the production of coherent community stems from those historical attempts to cohere groups along identities derived from nationalist ideologies. These nationalist calls to form coherent communities have been based on the ideological interpellation of individuals as coherent, unified, and predetermined subjects. Kwon argues that the coherent subjectivity required to produce these essential communities implies that “subjects within that community are unified

---

12 See Nancy, The Inoperative Community.
subjects, that their sense of who they are and where they are is transparent to themselves, not only to themselves, but also to others" (Kester 167).

The efficacy of this skeptical approach to communal identity, however, is questionable from a Native perspective, or the perspective of any group whose communal identity is predicated on the ontological notions of identity of its individual members. Grant Kester addresses Kwon’s anti-essentialist critique in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Here he is primarily concerned with analyzing what he defines as dialogic art—an aesthetic practice focused on instigating collaborative dialogue among communities. Part of Kester’s discussion takes up Nancy’s analysis of the problematic constitution of unified subjects and the predicaments presented by claims made for their formation of coherent communities. Kester argues that Nancy’s outright rejection of the possibility of the formation of coherent communities “effectively exiles vast areas of human collective experience to the wilderness of incipient fascism.” As an alternative to Nancy’s binary approach to communities—as either coherent (static) or incoherent (always coming into being)—Kester posits a dialogic approach that allows for what he calls a “provisional coherence.” He insists that “communication, in whatever form, must involve some ontological and temporal framework (however provisional) within which to speak as well as listen” (2004 157,158).

While Kwon counters what she believes to be outmoded essentialist conceptualizations of community and Kester argues for partial and provisional essentialism strategically invoked in the name of political resistance, what I want to emphasize here is a notion of community that is specifically and continuously predetermined as having an essential relation to place, not a community one joins at will as a form of resistance; not an optional community. The debates on essentialism between Kwon and Kester often focus on relationships among communities sited in a metropolitan setting—a setting which, as Kwon notes, un-

---

13 For a survey of critiques of the ideological implications of the notion of the subject, see Cadava, Connor, and Nancy, *Who Comes after the Subject?*

14 See especially chapter five, “Community and Communicability” in Kester.
dermines any possibility of invoking a “nostalgic fantasy of a pre-urban existence that is assumed to have been without alienation, mediation or violence” (Kwon 2002 149). However, the operative site of indigenous communities is often a traditional land base, or, as is often the case, the result of forced relocations, the reservation—an always already nostalgic site forever indexing home.

**Siting Reservation X**

It is the persistence of such place-bound identities that the Plains Cree artist and curator Gerald McMaster addressed when he curated *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art* in 1998 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. For this exhibition, he chose the Native reservation as the operative site of engagement. The exhibition featured the work of eight Native artists (Mary Longman, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Marianne Nicolson, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Mateo Romero, and C. Maxx Stevens) whom McMaster believed exemplified efforts by Native artists to merge the legacy of individualism with the dynamic and affirming bond of community. They no longer see the appeal of being marginalized iconoclasts but prefer to become active participants, where community and individual growth are not incompatible but complementary goals. (1998 23)

McMaster was fully aware of the contradictions present in actual reservations, which denote “a negotiated space set aside for Indian people by oppressive colonial governments to isolate them, to extricate them from their cultural habits, and to save them from the vices of the outside world.” He presented the dual nature of the reservation as “both sanctuary and prison,” as a place that “will always be both a symbolic and real home for most Indian people” (122 19). It is the site, real or imagined, to which many Native communities have an essential relationship. This is true even of those Native communities who have been so severely displaced that they lack access to a homeland.15 Even then, the locus

---

15 For an overview of the history of native dislocation and the status of native land claims see Churchill, “The Earth is Our Mother: Struggles for American Indian Land and Liberation in the Contemporary United States,” in Jaimes, 1992. For a discussion of the establishment
of the reservation functions dialectically as formative of Native identity. To designate the place of this ambivalent site, McMaster uses the term “Reservation X.” As he elaborates: “The urban and rural now make up two discursive spaces or communities that form the new reservation narrative” (21). This is a narrative that, unlike the analysis proposed by Kwon, acknowledges the complicated relationships of various sites in the formation of identity, whether individual or communal.16

The discursive production of “Reservation X” outlined by McMaster’s project is further affirmed by the claims to authenticity that are often made for such spaces by Native communities themselves. It is at this point, when the essential ties to place originate from an already existing community, that a project such as Kwon’s reveals instances of incommensurability between postmodern and Indigenous notions of identity. A postmodern approach is wary of claims to stable identities and espouses an anti-essentialism that is skeptical of the “cultural valorization of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity,” endorsing, instead, a fluid notion of identity (Kwon 2002 52). An indigenous claim to identity often appeals to a sense of identity dependent on the conjunction of history and place, an authentic sense of self constituted at the nexus of a site of origin and the place of performance. It is important to realize, however, that indigenous claims to authentic sites and essential identities are not necessarily strategic; they are often fundamental to Native epistemologies.17

---

16 McMaster borrowed the term “Reservation X” from Shelley Niro, who uses it as the setting for her film Honey Moccasins (1998).

17 On the Western production of the concepts of authenticity and primitivism, see Errington. For an analysis of the notion of authenticity and contemporary Aboriginal art see Marcia Langton, “Dreaming Art,” in Papastergiadis, Complex Entanglements. Langton argues that the representation of landscapes within various native art practices, including those by traditional Aboriginal desert painters, is a genre that requires a different scope of reception. For an analysis of the ideological implication of this genre in Australia see Levitus, Lying about the Landscape. For a survey of landscape representation of America as frontier, see Bruce, Myth of the West and Treuttner, The West as America. I am grateful to Ian McLean for bringing Langton’s article to my attention.
Whereas notions of authenticity and essentialism may become limiting burdens for artists attempting to avoid ghettoization in today’s global art market, many indigenous artists ignore this Western problematic altogether and opt to maintain an explicit reference to their ties with the land. An example of this engagement is the installation produced by Nora Naranjo-Morse for the Reservation X exhibition. *Gia’s Song* consists of a constructed dwelling within the gallery space that is two-sided. One side of the structure references the stuccoed government housing that began to replace the traditional adobe structures of Santa Clara Pueblo, her tribal home, in the 1970s. The other side of the installation references the traditional homes made of mud, straw, and sand, the local materials that make up adobe bricks, the elemental component of traditional Pueblo homes. Naranjo-Morse explains the contrast in approaches to home construction depicted in her installation as referencing the disparity between a Western and a Pueblo approach to communal identity.

While the frame homes were quickly manufactured by construction crews out of pre-fabricated materials, adobe homes, which often accommodate extended families, take years to make and require a communal effort for their construction. In addition, the relationship of these dwellings to the land is explicitly related to cultural beliefs about the building materials and their relationship to the environment. Naranjo-Morse explains that adobe construction is not only “a practical way of using the environment to build shelter, but it was and still is our connection to the earth. Our culture built its belief system to a great degree on the environment, including the idea that we emerged from the earth. This idea is still very rooted in people like me who insist on building their own homes” (1998:87). Although the installation may be interpreted as representing two separate moments, that of the contemporary HUD (Housing and Urban Development) home and the past moment of the adobe home, it is the coexistence of these structures on her tribal land that Naranjo-Morse emphasizes. One side of her construction represents the outer wall of a HUD home, riddled with graffiti, with a window that allows a view into a room filled with household items that refer to the process of cultural assimilation: a television, a crucifix, and bags of Red Man brand chewing tobacco (Figure 27). The other side of the structure is a space
that is structured by earth colored walls, indexing traditional adobe, which become curvilinear and eventually lead to an intimate altar-like space (Figure 28).

![Figure 28](image)

**Figure 27.** Nora Naranjo-Morse, *Gia’s Song*, multimedia installation, 1998. Detail showing representation of exterior of HUD home. Interior installation is visible through window.

Although the traditional adobe process may invoke a nostalgic past when the process of adobe construction united and to a great extent helped to define the community, it is its continuous use that is at the heart of the artist’s project. To a great extent, the maintenance of traditions depends on a nostalgic vision of the past, a view that inspires a desire to retain these practices. Since not all traditions are maintained, those that are kept make explicit their nurturing of the past. Naranjo-Morse recounts how her community’s vision of the past is passed on to future generations through the adobe building techniques:

> When we built our house our children saw family members come by and unload adobes. They saw their mother and father plastering. One day . . . we saw the government-built HUD houses. The first thing my son said was, “Where is the mud?” When he said that, I could not control the tears. I realized we had put him in a unique position to understand something very elemental about himself and his relationship with his family and the culture. (Naranjo-Morse 1998, 86)
While the aesthetic of Naranjo-Morse’s installation, and of all the artists represented in the Reservation X exhibition, is clearly conversant with contemporary approaches to avant-garde art production, they are also careful to reference traditional media and iconography.

Figure 28. Nora Naranjo-Morse, Gia’s Song, multimedia installation, 1998. Detail showing altar space within adobe structure.

However, because her work references a traditional paradigm of identity, one which depends on a metonymic relationship between the body and the land, it is often relegated to those categories of contemporary art production described as ethnographic or postcolonial. The former has been identified by Hal Foster as the kind of work that relies on essentialist notions of alterity, a process he describes as a “self-othering” that runs the risk of “remaking the other in neoprimitivist guise” (1996 197). The latter category, that of postcolonial art, is described by the art critic Ian McLean as “a syncretic modernism that, in the spirit of modernism, is grounded in the temporality and spatiality of modernity and its global orientation” (2003 228). While Foster uses the category of the artist as eth-

---

18 I will return to Foster’s argument in chapter five.
nographer to distinguish artists whose main concern is to occupy the role of the cosmopolitan other assigned by a Western art market from those artists critical of such a role, McLean attempts to make a finer distinction. He uses the term postcolonial artist to differentiate those artists whose main engagement is with Western aesthetics from those who are focused on their relationship to a specific place, whom he refers to as “Indigenous artists.” For McLean, Indigenous artists produce work that emphasizes “the specificity of place and locality that characterises traditional cultures” (McClean 2003 228).

McLean has noted how these different approaches function in the presentation of traditional Aboriginal art in Australia:

The burden of authenticity felt so heavily by postcolonial artists . . . is, for Indigenous artists, a liberation and essential component of their identity. The old desert painters wear this authenticity lightly because it is so much a part of them. Far from being a burden hoisted on them by Eurocentric intellectuals wanting to legitimise their own modernity, it is and always has been the secret of the success of Indigenous art. (2003 240)

McLean makes a crucial distinction between the position of the Indigenous artists, whom he describes as belonging to a traditional culture, and the position occupied by postcolonial artists, whom he identifies as those who “work across a range of styles and ideas in a deliberate hybrid fashion that is global and temporal in outlook”(228).

Despite his awkward use of “Indigenous” as a modifier to designate the traditional Native artist, leaving “postcolonial” to mark the hybrid artist, and thus positing a distinction based on notions of authenticity, what I would like to focus on is that McLean bases his distinction on the artist’s connection to a place. This is a provocative distinction, particularly since it does not account for the location of artists, such as the participants in “Reservation X,” who strongly identify with a specific place and yet participate in the production of what McLean considers

---

19 Foster discusses the work of Edgar Heap of Birds, Jimmie Durham, and James Luna as examples of artists whose work is often concerned with the stereotypical roles they are expected to play within the market and whose works “resist further primitivizing and anthropologizing through a parodic ‘trickstering’ of these very processes” (1996 199).
postcolonial art. Although he goes on to complicate the distinction he initially sets up and warns that “we need to be wary of a postcolonial primitivism inherited from modernist times that precludes the Indigenous from the postcolonial,” acknowledging the work of postcolonial indigenous Australian artists such as Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Hockey, the distinction he initially draws—between a postcolonial art concerned with Western aesthetics and an Indigenous art based on an essential connection to place—is useful when considering the location of works such Gia’s Song by Naranjo-Morse within these discourses (2003, 240). This postcolonial work of art focuses on traditional house construction practices that reaffirm an essentialist tie between Pueblo Natives and their land.

McLean’s discussion of the essentialism involved in claiming authenticity explicitly points to a paradigmatic chasm between certain indigenous perspectives on the essentialism of identity and those espousing a (post)modern perspective. As the above discussion on “Reservation X” illustrates, this distinction (essentialist/traditional v. anti-essentialist/postcolonial) is complicated by the use of postmodern aesthetics to express traditional beliefs. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori cultural studies scholar, explains, indigenous notions of essentialism are complex:

The essence of a person is also discussed in relation to indigenous concepts of spirituality. In these views, the essence of a person has a genealogy which can be traced back to an earth parent, usually glossed as an Earth Mother. A human person does not stand alone, but shares with other animate, and in the Western sense, “inanimate” beings, a relationship based on a shared “essence” of life. The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of a people, makes for a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by indigenous peoples. (74)  

For Smith, a Native perspective often includes the notion that one’s land is a site

---

20 See Nabokov, Sacred Land Reader for an overview of issues dealing with Native religions in relation to sites considered sacred.
of authenticity that engenders essential identities; it represents the place essential to Native identity.

The propriety of place, the relationship of Native bodies to sites that ground identity, can be explored by examining the experience of the non-Native visiting a tribal museum. The sites of these museums, often located on tribal land, help to produce narratives that are greatly influenced by the approach and departure from the building, which often involves negotiating a Native space, a space often explicitly designated as sovereign by signage. The relationship of narrative to place, the setting for the museum’s narration, is crucial to noting the differences in the ways museums function on the reservation versus off the reservation. This is especially true for the non-Native visitor whose performance of the museum can be a somewhat uncanny experience, the illegitimate experience of not belonging to a place, of being a foreigner.

In his analysis of the museum as site, James Clifford describes the museum as a “contact zone,” a term he borrows from Mary Louise Pratt, who defines it as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (1997, 192).

In this essay, Clifford’s focus is on the relationships produced within the space of the Western museum, and particularly the exchanges between Native communities and Western museums whose holdings include their cultural property. He is careful to acknowledge the power inequalities that constitute these relationships. These are not places for benign cultural encounters. Instead, these are sites that collect “particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization.” What he advocates is the enacting of the Western museum as a site for negotiation where the “contact work” of “active collaboration and a sharing of authority” can occur (213–210).

21 For an overview of the complicated development of native representation in museums see Berlo and Phillips, “Our (Museum) World Turned Upside Down.”

22 Cited in Clifford, 1997, 192. Pratt introduces her in concept in “Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone,” in Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation.
In an earlier essay, titled “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” Clifford compared the display strategies of two Western museums he visited in Vancouver—the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum—to two smaller Northwest tribal museums on Vancouver Island—the U’mista Cultural Centre and the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre. While all four museums feature materials belonging to various Northwest Coast communities, the two tribal museums have an unusual history. They were formed in the late 1970s as part of an agreement to repatriate items confiscated during a potlatch ceremony held in 1921, a practice that by that time had been outlawed.23

Although his analysis of the various approaches to the display of Native cultures—such as the emphasis on aesthetics and the degree of historical contextualization—directly relates to issues I have raised above, what is most pertinent to the present discussion are his observations on the relationship of the visitor to the site of the museum. Clifford notes the significant difference it makes to belong to the immediate community represented by the tribal museums, the difference it makes to how the visitor performs the museum’s narrative. As he states: “Objects here are family and community memorabilia. To an outsider, at least, a great part of their evocative power—beyond their formal, aesthetic values—is the simple here . . . In a local museum, “here” matters” (1997 126).

Clifford’s awareness of his position as an outsider in the museum is highlighted by an exchange that occurred not in the exhibition space of the museum but in the gift shop of the Kwagiulth Museum. At first is he is disappointed to see postcards featuring photographs by Edward S. Curtis. He knows these images well, as the kind of images that all too often work to perpetuate stereo-

23 Repatriation, which in the context of this chapter can be described as the re-siting of cultural objects to their proper place, has been a long struggle for many native communities, many who have lost their cultural treasures through unethical collecting. On the development of major collections of Native objects in large urban museums, a process that has often involved the aid of anthropologists and art historians, see Cole, Captured Heritage; a critical assessment is also found in Dubin, Native America Collected; a study that is more sympathetic to the practices of Western collecting can be found in Krech and Hall, Collecting Native America. On repatriation, see Mihesuah, Repatriation Reader; Tweedie, Drawing Back Culture; Barkan and Bush, Claiming the Stones/Naming the Bones and Brown, Who Owns Native Culture?
types of Natives. However, he reconsiders how these images signify within the context of the community after he turns over one of the cards and reads the caption (Figure 29). Clifford notes that Curtis’s original title, *Nakoaktok Chief and Copper*, has been placed in quotes and is supplemented by text that explains that the Nakoaktok are Kwakwaka’wakw people and that the head chief, Hakalaht (‘Overall’), is holding the copper Wamistikila (‘Takes Everything Out of the House’) (127) (Figure 29). Although the additional information further contextualizes the image and does much to attribute subjectivity to its subject, it is the location of Clifford’s engagement with the image that is significant. As he states: “What the image communicates here may be quite different from the exoticism and pathos registered by an audience of strangers” (127).

![Figure 29](image-url) Edward Curtis, “Nakoaktok Chief and Copper,” Hakalaht (‘Overall’) holding the copper Wamistikila (‘Takes Everything Out of the House’).

---

24 Although Clifford implies that the supplemental text may have been added by the museum staff, the caption he cites reads much like the one originally provided by Curtis. See Curtis Graybill and Boesen, “The Portfolio,” caption for plate 43, n.p.
The placing of quotes around the title and the additional information added by the museum staff radically re-contextualize the image. The generic description of a Nakoaktok Chief is supplemented by the Chief’s name and the copper he holds is also specifically identified. The modified caption provides subjectivity to an otherwise objectified figure. Through the process of providing a proper context for the image, Curtis’s photograph has been re-appropriated and repatriated; it has been brought home.

Figure 30. Display of Quiché Maya culture, Musée de l’Homme, Paris.

In view of this possibility, I would like to turn my attention to an analysis of techniques of museum display that, although structurally remaining the same, radically change in function when instituted by tribal museums, rather than Western museums. One such technique is the representation of the Native body, which in Western museums has come to mean an approach that attempts to eliminate the representation of specific physical characteristics. This approach, which may be seen as an attempt to sidestep the charged issue of representing racial markers, leaves these effigies of bodies functioning merely as mannequins, as mere settings for cultural objects. A typical example is a display from the Mu-
seum of Man in Paris featuring the customary dress of the Quiché Maya from Guatemala (Figure 30). Here, the body of the Native is de-emphasized, the skin tone of the figure as a neutral beige and her facial features have been reduced to a hint of a nose. The emphasis, instead, is on highlighting the objects that are the focus of the display. In this instance, the emphasis is on the huipil, the hand-woven blouse, the corte, or hand-woven skirt, and the various artifacts that index Quiché Maya culture. As Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Maya from Guatemala and renowned advocate of international indigenous rights, states: “That is what hurts Indians most . . . [non-Natives] think our costumes are beautiful . . . but it’s as if the person wearing it doesn’t exist” (209).

This statement comes from Menchú’s biographical testimonial *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, which brought her plight and that of her Native community to international attention in the late 80s. The book was compiled from interviews by the anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, which were taped 1982 while Menchú was in Paris as a representative of the “Frente Popular 31 de enero,” The January 31st Popular Front, a coalition of six Guatemalan human rights organizations. It was one stop along a tour in Europe in which Menchú worked to garner international attention to the human rights abuses against the Native population occurring Guatemala. During these political tours, Menchú was careful to wear some of her traditional garments, knowing how legible these would be as markers of Native identity. Native political leaders often display their traditional regalia in this way and Menchú understands how, outside of the context of a museum, an emphasis on the visual codes of Indigeneity are effective means of obtaining public attention, strategically playing on the perceived disjuncture between Western and Native dress, where the latter is seen not only out of place but also out of time. Within the transcription of Menchú’s

---

25 Errington defends a more radical version of this strategy as it is used in the Mexico City Museum: “Far better (in my opinion) than many ethnographic dioramas in museums in the United States, those in this museum deliberately mute realism: the clothing, tools, and accoutrements are, in fact, apparently real, taken from the village or market, but the mannequins are stylized, and many backdrops are starkly bare or merely gesture toward realist models. (175).
life story, Burgos-Debray expresses her fascination with Menchú’s traditional
dress, which she describes at length in the introduction to the book, not noticing
the strategy being enacted by Menchú in Paris, home of the Musée de l’Homme.

An even more severe example of the dissolution of the Native body can
be found at the Museo de Oro, the Museum of Gold, in Bogotá, Colombia
(Figure 31). This realistically rendered figure stands at the entrance to the mu-
seum, his skin an even dull gray. His ominous frame, which references another
“original peoples,” the ancient Greek, primarily functions as a display fixture to
display elaborate gold ornaments. The body is encased within heavy security
glass and is dramatically lit from various directions. There is no explanation of who
the figure represents or any cultural context for the objects he wears.26 What

---

26 This is not the case for most of the other displays in the museum, which ethnographical-
ly identify objects and their manufacturing.
matters are is the display of the elaborate ornaments, and particularly the precious metal from which they have been factured—gold. Although the museum catalogues the sophisticated smelting techniques of the Native peoples of the region, it highlights their objects not so much for their cultural value as for the metal’s exchange value. It is the national museum of gold after all. In this case, it is the metal, rather than the Native body, that is metonymic of the land’s valuable resources.  

Figure 32. Display of group portraits of Warm Springs community members. The Museum at Warm Springs.

However, many tribal museums take great care to particularize the Native body. This means that at times portraits of the artist accompany displays of their artworks. A powerful example is the group of portraits of Makah weavers found in the weaving exhibition at the Makah Cultural and Research Center, located on the Makah reservation in Neah Bay, Washington. The images testify to the strong living weaving tradition maintained through the efforts of the museum and its

27 This institution is run by the Colombian national bank, which may explain the emphasis on the net value of the golden artifacts rather than their cultural significance.
community. Another example of the attention paid to the representation of the Native body within a tribal museum is a display found at the Museum at Warm Springs, on the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, home to three Native communities: the Warm Springs, the Wasco, and the Paiute (Figure 32). The photographic figures are life size and cut out in order to produce the feeling of community as members group together, many dressed in their traditional regalia. A book displaying pictures of all the members of the community that participated in the event is part of the display. These are images of Native bodies that represent communities, the communities found outside the museum’s door.

A technique that used to display ethnographic materials since the inception of the natural history museum is the diorama. The objective of these displays is to produce an extremely realistic space in an attempt to fully contextualize objects by recreating their original environment. It often involves the replication of objects set against painted backdrops, seamlessly incorporated as part of the display. The process involves the production of a place in space, an approach that effectively uses realism to literally locate, in the sense of placing, culture. The dependence on realism in these displays is noteworthy. In her discussion of the use of a realist aesthetic in dioramas, Donna Haraway states, “To make an exact image is to insure against disappearance, to cannibalize life until it is safely and permanently a specular image, a ghost. . . . The aesthetic appropriate to exhibition, conservation, and eugenics from 1890 to 1930 was realism” (1989 45).

In addition to the realistic rendition of space, these displays also play with perceptions of time. They place cultures in settings that often imply a moment in the past, not historically specific but at of a temporal distance to deny coevalness. The presence witnessed is real, but often within a landscape set far away, while also temporally placed at a distance, always out of reach.

It is exactly the diorama’s fascinating effect of producing a perception of

---

28 For a history of the diorama, see Wonders, Habitat Dioramas. For a discussion of the gender dynamics involved in the creation of an idealized natural habitat see Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-36,” in Primate Visions. For an approach to the analysis of the “truth speak” of dioramas, both in their use of realism and their expository textual framing, see Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off,” in Double Exposures.
frozen history that has been the focus of critiques of this technology, particularly when these artificial settings include representations of Native bodies. In “The Museum Indian: Still Frozen in Time and Mind,” Richard W. Hill, Sr. emphasizes that “dioramas tend to keep Indians in the natural history arena, next to the stuffed animals and frozen specimens” (40). It is no coincidence that dioramas often represent Native bodies in a landscape. As the Native body is frozen in the past, the landscape also falls under the Medusan gaze of the museum.

In her study of the history of dioramas, Karen Wonders describes an early example of the use of miniature dioramas as commercial displays. She cites as an example the Canadian Forestry Exhibit, a miniature diorama installed at the 1939 Canada Pacific Exhibition to promote the scenic magnificence of Canada and its wealth of natural resources (1993 14). In this instance, the diorama functioned as geological, botanical, and biological survey, much like an investment prospectus. In her work on early travel writings, Mary Louise Pratt considers the comprehensive details used to represent the American landscape by Western authors as the “monarch-of-all-I-can-survey scene.” She writes that these literary panoramas “involve particularly explicit interaction between esthetics and ideology, in what one might call a rhetoric of presence” (1992 205). I want to suggest that such a rhetoric of presence is at play in the depiction of landscape in these kinds of dioramas that feature, and celebrate, Western expansionism.

One should also consider the visitor’s experience of the landscape when thinking about how the landscape represented within the museum operates. In this case, the rhetoric of presence becomes site specific. The reception of the representation of the Native body in a landscape provided by the diorama radically shifts when viewing such a display within the actual confines of the landscape represented, within the boundaries of “Reservation X.”
Returning to The Museum at Warm Springs, one of its highlights is a dramatic diorama depicting some of the essential preparations for a traditional marriage (Figure 33). The scene features a “wedding trade,” the exchange of goods customarily required during an engagement ceremony. The bride is seen at the left of the arrangement being attended to by women from the groom’s side while the groom is seen at the right. A feature about these figures that becomes immediately apparent is that their appearances are individualized. The figures are, in fact, portraits of some of the members of the community. The many gifts being exchanged are examples of items produced using local traditional techniques and designs. The scene represented is part of the tradition of the local tribes represented at the museum, which allows the diorama to function not just as a cultural representation but as a didactic tool for the local Native communities who can use these objects as samples for producing their own work. In this way, the display addresses an insider audience. At the same time, the diorama also

works to inform outside audiences about Warm Springs traditions, visitors who learn about the traditions from a distance. The difference in the level of intimacy with which the viewer engages the scene is emphasized by the representation of the landscape, or, rather, lack thereof. The dark background, however, is easily filled by the visitor’s experience of the reservation’s landscape outside the museum (Figure 34). The viewer’s perception of this landscape, as familiar or foreign, has a direct effect on his or her relationship with the objects found inside the museum.

Figure 34. Landscape at Warm Springs reservation surrounding the Museum at Warm Springs.

Native land as homeland, often referenced as reservation, is an essential locus for the production of Native identity. Within the museum, the Native is often represented as inhabiting an imaginary landscape, a romantic landscape set in the distant past, the nostalgic time and space before contact. While this imagery may produce the desired effect in a metropolitan setting, with visitors familiar with the colonial narrative on display, the site of tribal museums—often located within the confines of a reservation—provides a different framing for a different kind of narrative, one which emphasizes the contemporaneity of the subjects represented within.
Having considered how the notion of Reservation X as homeland, and the homeyness of the tribal museum, contextualizes a visitor’s experience, I will now turn to an analysis of the representation of dwellings with the space of the museum. The artificial production of domestic space within the public site of the museum further complicates the visitor’s performative engagement with the museum. Here, again, site-specificity is key for interpreting the meaning produced by these sorts of displays.

**At Home: Permanence of Time and Place**

If, as Donna Haraway suggests, part of the museum’s purpose is the “conservation, preservation, and the production of permanence,” this sense of duration and immobility created by museum exhibitions has a different effect when considering tribal museums. As I have been arguing, the artifice of a realist aesthetic, which emphasizes the diachronic relationship of viewer and the scene represented within the diorama, has a different function within a tribal museum. As the experience recounted by Clifford makes clear, a synchronicity is established as the visitor realizes that the realism within the diorama has a metonymic connection to the site of the museum. A spatial and temporal continuity between the inside and outside of the museum is established.

The continuity between the artifice created within the tribal museum and the reality encountered outside is excellently illustrated by an exhibition found at the Makah Cultural and Research Center. The museum is located in Neah Bay, Washington, a traditional Native village that is part of the Makah Nation. The journey to this museum is itself a dramatic part of engaging the cultural artifacts found within. After a long drive into ever-thickening forests, three hours from Seattle, one encounters a sign clearly stating that you are entering Makah territory and outlining a list of basic policies to be followed within the Makah nation. The border to the Makah nation is clearly marked.

The cultural center was created to store and display the archaeological finding at Ozette village, a site nearby that had been tragically buried during a mudslide in 1500 C.E., leaving a rich record of everyday life, much like that left at Pompeii during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. The museum is exemplary of the in-
novative strategies employed by Native communities to represent their own cultural property.\textsuperscript{30} The displays include objects and scenes from traditional Makah life, some of which are recreated within dioramas.

One particularly effective display at the Makah museum is a replica of a traditional cedar longhouse (Figure 35). The structure was built using traditional techniques and allowed to weather before being installed within the museum. There is not much artifice in this display; all the artifacts within the dwelling are real. The only illusory aspects of the display are two artificial fires and a diorama scene of a beach, which the visitor encounters when looking out the doorway at the far end of the house. The experience of traversing these diverse spaces is disorienting. The inside of the longhouse, which is itself inside the space of the museum, leads to an artificial outside, which is a representation of a reality long ago but at a place nearby. This multiple displacement is compounded further

\textsuperscript{30} For a history of the Makah Cultural and Research Center see Ward and Wachendorf, and also Tweedy.
when one walks outside the museum and finds a similar longhouse that has been built at the other end of the museum’s parking lot. This is another “real” longhouse, this one with a real fireplace and an outside that leads to a real beach. One of the main purposes of this structure is to hold a variety of classes on traditional skills, including Makah language classes, for the immediate community. The narrative represented inside the museum is lived immediately outside.

Unlike those found in metropolitan ethnographic museums, the dioramas and other realist strategies deployed within these tribal museums do not construct what Jean Baudrillard has described as hyperreality: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (32). The origin and reality of the Native experience they portray do not produce a simulacral effect. Nor are these nostalgic representations that attempt to invent an idealized past. Rather, these are metonymic presentations of lived experience, past and present. Unlike the nostalgic production of a past that counters that imagined by the West, which I identified as an anti-imperialist nostalgic aesthetic in the previous chapter, here I am arguing that these representations produce a past reality that is continuous and contiguous with the present.31

I have been discussing how the narrative of the tribal museum depends on its siting, on its intimate relationship to place. The representation of traditional dwellings within Western museums contrasts greatly with that exemplified by the Makah Cultural and Research Center. In her discussion of the authenticity of the displays at the Northwest Coast village recreated in the Grand Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Judith Ostrowitz painstakingly analyzes the complicated negotiations, compromises, and inventions that took place in the development of the exhibit. She describes the production of six houses within the large hall representing six Northwest Coast communities: the Coast Salish, Nuu-chah-nulth, Kwakwaka’wakw, Nuxalk, Haida, and Tsimshian (Figure 36). Different strategies were used by the various Native nations in building these houses, some foregoing adherence to the proper protocols required in building such traditional

31 For a study of the production of nostalgic hyperreality see Zukin’s study of “Main Street, U.S.A,” in Landscapes of Power.
structures in order to represent themselves within this important Canadian venue. Ostrowitz describes the pragmatism involved for the various Native nations: “Today’s protocol, to appear as a force to be reckoned with and sought after for its imprimatur, in full view of the Canadian Parliament buildings, may have encouraged the participation of native representatives in this display of constructed history made for the Grand Hall” (82). What this example makes perfectly clear are the complexities of representing the relationships that exist between these Native nations and the colonizing nation. The dynamics performed in this space make visible the continuous efforts toward decolonization.

Figure 36. The Grand Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization. Facades of six Northwest Coast communities are visible at right.

While Ostrowitz considers the role of the Native in the museum as one of responding to the colonizer, what I have tried to emphasize is the process of self-representation that takes place within the tribal museum. In discussing the hegemonic implications of the exhibit within the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 32

32 In his analysis of tribal museums and Canadian museums, Clifford does not consider the Native nationalism implicated by tribal museums. The distinction he makes is between “majority museums,” which are metropolitan, and tribal museums, which he describes as local museums (1997 122).
Ostrowitz explains that: “Successful inculcation, in the case of the Grand Hall on
the subject of Native Canadian history, may depend on ‘symbolic force’—on
the excellence and credibility of its symbolic representation, and on the authority
of its venue” (80). Although the Canadian Museum of Civilization is concerned
with presenting a comprehensive grouping of its (Canada’s) Native populations,
the address of a tribal museum is twofold: it presents the Native nation to itself
while also addressing the outside visitor. This often means a privileging of the for-
mer at the expense of the latter, hence the outsider’s experience as a foreigner.

It is obvious that the notion of “home” is relative to that of “foreign,” one
depends on the other. I would like to return to my discussion of the Makah long-
house to consider the relationships established at sites where contesting national-
isms coexist. As with the collaboration between museums and those artists en-
gaged in institutional critiques discussed at the beginning of this chapter, these
sites are highly mediated. Although the doubling of the traditional Makah long-
house, which I discussed earlier, may produce a sense of displacement, the
longhouse outside the museum is perceived as being more appropriately
placed, as more at home than the one realistically rendered inside. Peter Mason
discusses the notion of “being at home” in contrast to terms used in the discursive
production of the exotic. He states that: “the exotic is produced by a process of
decontextualization and recontextualization. . . To the extent that this fit is infel-
citous, the exotic is never at home” (1998 5, 6). In terms of the tribal museum, it is
the non-Native visitor, instead, who is decontextualized, exotic, explicitly not at
home.

Using the structure of the longhouse as a metaphor for a dwelling that
connotes homeliness, I would like to continue to analyze the significance of the
display of these dwellings within a larger context. While the houses found within
the Canadian Museum of Civilization connote the colonial relationship of nations
within nations—the Native dwellings enveloped by the museum—there are other
instances in which the representation of these types of dwellings within Western
museums conveys a more complicated global history colonization. I would now
like to consider two examples of Maori traditional longhouses found in Museums
outside Aotearoa/New Zealand in order to think about how these Western dis-
plays of traditional dwellings have been strategically turned by Maori into opportunities to maintain and manage a presence in the world.\textsuperscript{33}

In her study of the state of contemporary museum studies, 	extit{Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture}, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill devotes a chapter to the function of a traditional Maori meetinghouse, named 	extit{Hinemihi a te Ao Tawhi-to} (Hinemihi of the Ancient World), located in Clandon Park, England. Purchased in 1892 by Lord Onslow, the retiring Governor of New Zealand, the house was brought to England. Its dislocation traces the colonial economy that continues to exist between England and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As a token within this economy, Hinemihi’s value, as determined by its function in reflecting English-New Zealand-Maori relations, has been in constant flux. Since being rebuilt in Clandon Park, it has served as a boathouse, a garden summerhouse, and most recently has been returned by the Maori to its original function as a 	extit{whare nui}, or traditional meetinghouse. The re-inscription of the house within Maori tradition allows it to serve an important role within Maori protocols of 	extit{manaaki} (hospitality). These are complex sets of practices and ceremonies that are strictly observed, and differ among Maori communities. The 	extit{powhiri}, or welcoming ceremony, performed at a traditional meeting house is particularly important in establishing a common ground for host and guest to meet.\textsuperscript{34} As such, these protocols point to different paradigms for encountering the other, ones that contrast greatly with those followed by Columbus.\textsuperscript{35}

While Hooper-Greenhill gives a detailed history of the house’s historical trajectory in order to note how “the object is constructed and reconstructed as

\textsuperscript{33} Aotearoa/New Zealand is officially a bicultural state and uses both English and Maori as its official languages, including in its name.

\textsuperscript{34} For an overview of the history of the traditional Maori meeting house see Walker, “Marae: A Place to Stand,” in \textit{Te Ao Hurihuri: Aspects of Maoritanga}. I want to thank Chris Bryant for bringing this and many other fundamental texts on Maori culture to my attention.

\textsuperscript{35} For a discussion of non-Western paradigms of encountering the other that not only expect the other but accommodates the other through protocols of welcome and hospitality see Caro, “Persistent Encounters: Maintaining Indigenous Identity through Cultural Exchange,” in \textit{Hitéemkiliksix: Within the Circle of the Rim}, 29-33.
the frameworks for interpretation and the interpreting subjects change," what I want to emphasize is its role in reassigning agency to its Maori owners in contextualizing their cultural representation within museums that have traditionally thwarted that possibility (75). The Maori have determined that the house should function to welcome all visitors: non-Maori are invited to learn about Maori culture while Maori visitors are provided a home away from home. This is a process that Arjun Appadurai has described as the spatial production of locality (180). As Hare Waikingi, a Maori elder participating in the blessing ceremony, stated: “We will leave her here for this purpose, and not take her home. Our children will come to visit her in the new century to maintain the unity which she represents today” (52).

Arapata Hakiwai, a Maori curator at Te Papa, New Zealand/Aotearoa’s national museum, has looked at a similar situation in her analysis of the location of Ruatopupuke, a Maori meeting house found in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Although the circumstances are similar, the consequences have been different.

Hakiwai was asked by the Tokomaru Bay people, the Maori community who originally owned the house, to assist in the restoration and conservation of this traditional meeting house. In her essay, “Ruatopupuke: Working Together, Understanding One Another,” she considers the complicated disputes within various Maori communities presented by the inelicitous location of this house. As with Hinemihi, the house was purchased by a non-Maori and taken outside the country. In this instance, it was bought in 1890s by J. G. Umlauff, a German collector, and was subsequently sold to the Field Museum. Although some Maori were adamant about repatriating this cultural treasure, observance of “te tino rangatiratanga,” the principle of absolute tribal sovereignty, prevailed and the Tokomaru Bay tribe, whose ancestors made the house, made the decision to restore the house and allow it to remain in Chicago.

This decision was not only important in reinforcing the tribe’s sovereignty within New Zealand, it also established their presence and agency within an international arena by becoming partners with the Field Museum in caring for their cultural treasure. As Hakiwai notes: “Partnership and developing relationships
can thus be seen as empowering and providing greater opportunity for Maori to be involved and in control of the process" (1994 43).

Another consequence of the Tokomaru Bay people’s decision to maintain the house in Chicago was to establish relationships with various Native American nations. Aware of their similar colonial histories, the Maori made sure that the museum’s interactions included local Native American nations. Hakiwai states that the Maori: “insisted that we acknowledge and pay respect to the indigenous people . . . as we were traversing their land, their country and their mana. . . . [I]n looking at our relationship we also made the Field Museum look at their relationship with the first nation people . . . as we were insistent that we were only visitors to their land” (44). Thus, Maori maintenance of a relationship based on the infelicitous placement of Ruapepupuke within the Field Museum also highlights the infelicitous placement of the Field Museum on Native land.  

My examination of traditional Native dwellings housed, as in made to reside, within Western museums has expanded on my previous discussion on the site specificity of the museum. These examples, and there are many more, of homes taken, or produced, away from their sites of origin illustrate how these attempts to sever their essential connection to their communities can be subverted by those same communities. They have provided Native communities the opportunity to take back control of spaces produced to disseminate colonizing narratives.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing Austin’s notion of the performative speech act and its dependence on a proper context for an effective result. I then applied this idea of a proper context to the exhibitory practices within the museum, as well as the propriety of the location of the museum itself.

An important aspect of Austin’s idea of symbolic actions is that even when they fail to enact the intended results these acts, which he termed “infelicitous,” still signify. The act of exhibiting within the museum, as Bal has argued, is

36 The Maori term mana connotes prestige, status, authority.
itself a speech act that depends on objects to reify narratives. These acts of exposition involve the re-contextualization of cultural objects, an act that always risks infelicitous results. These inappropriate outcomes are at times precipitated by artists intent on intervening in processes of display that would otherwise naturalize the museum’s narrative. I discussed the work of Fred Wilson as the kind of institutional critique that permits viewers to consider the often-invisible hand of the curator. A similar understanding of the performances of Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and James Luna provides a view on how these interventions were specifically concerned with the infelicitous display of Native culture, and especially the Native body, within Western museums.

Much of the inappropriateness of Western displays of Native cultures has to do with depictions of the relationship between the Native and the land. I focused on the propriety of this relationship by discussing the notions of site-specificity advanced by Miwon Kwon and applying these to the locus of the museum. I contrasted her analysis of site-specific art and her conclusions about the production of communities with those of Gerald McMaster and his conception of “Reservation X” as the place proper to the Native. The contrast between these positions provoked an analysis of the paradigmatic differences between Western anti-essentialism and Native claims to an essential relationship between the body and the land.

These are incompatibilities that are illustrated by the act of exhibition as it is enacted within Native museums. James Clifford’s observations on his experiences at four Northwest Coast museums, two Western and two tribal, provided insights on the propriety of the museum visitor as well as exhibition technologies. An old but persistent example of a museum technology whose siting produces a difference in interpretation is the diorama. These highly realistic displays have a radically different effect depending on their location: in a Western museum, they present the Native frozen in another time and place, a hyperreal production of the Native, while in a tribal museum there is a temporal and spatial contiguity that establishes a present presence.

The homeliness invoked by the tribal museum at the same time brings into focus the always already global situation of Native communities. This is true not
only when relationships among these various Native communities are put on display but also when these communities are active in the representation of their own cultures within Western museums. Their being at home in the world was illustrated by the display of various traditional Maori longhouses found outside of New Zealand/Aotearoa.

These constant negotiations—the making and unmaking of the infelicitous—within the site, and the siting, of the museum point to the potential growth of empowerment by Native cultures to represent themselves. The decolonization of the museum has not only led to the development of tribal museology, it is also beginning to alter Western methods of displaying Native cultures, approaches that are more collaborative and allow for possibilities of self-representation.\(^{37}\)

The next chapter will continue to explore Native self-representation through an examination of self-portraiture. As we have seen thus far, Native cultures have been represented and contextualized at various sites—the archive, the academy, and the museum—as part of a colonial project more than five hundred years in the making. And it is the figure of the Native body in particular that has come to stand in metonymically for Native cultures and their histories, functioning as a sign whose meaning has been determined by and fixed within these discursive sites. An analysis of the genre of self-portraiture allows us to consider further possibilities for Native artists to renegotiate the colonial legacy of the Native as image.

\(^{37}\) Two recent anthologies that take into account a Native perspective to museology are Lonetree and Cobb, The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations and Sleeper-Smith, Contesting Knowledge.