

# 1 “White People will Believe Anything!” Worrying 2 3 about Authenticity, Museum Audiences, and 4 Working in Native American-Focused Museums<sup>1</sup> 5 6 7

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10 **P**aul Chaat Smith (Comanche), associate  
11 curator at the National Museum of the  
12 American Indian (NMAI), just told me that  
13 I’m not very bright and that everything I know  
14 about Indians<sup>2</sup> is wrong.<sup>3</sup>

15 Some days his assessment is spectacularly on  
16 target, although on most days I just do what I do  
17 and won’t let what he says bother me all that much.  
18 On my “not very bright” days, I have to wonder. A  
19 couple of recent ones really stand out.

20 A Native American colleague<sup>4</sup> and I were sharing  
21 a presentation to elementary and secondary tea-  
22 chers at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians  
23 and Western Art, which is where part of my job as  
24 Public Scholar of Native American Representation  
25 resides. I discussed some general cultural issues re-  
26 lating to Indians and sovereignty with the teachers,  
27 then my colleague gave his own perspective on the  
28 issues. When the time for questions came, most of  
29 them were addressed to him. He’s a pretty good  
30 speaker, and the audience was hanging on his every  
31 word. Along the way I heard him give a pre-  
32 posterous answer to a question about his people’s  
33 practices. As we were leaving I told him I didn’t be-  
34 lieve a word of it and asked him why he would say  
35 such a thing. His refreshingly honest response was  
36 startling: “I have a rule when talking to mostly non-  
37 Indian audiences. If I get asked a question and don’t  
38 know the answer, I make it up. White people will  
39 believe anything, and if they don’t believe me, they  
40 are too nice to say so.” Even though the audience  
41 members were well-meaning and intensely inter-  
42 ested in Indians—they wouldn’t have been there  
43 otherwise—that they apparently believed my col-  
44 league was proof enough of what Smith says.  
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51 The next “not-very-bright day” was downright  
52 gloomy. I served as faculty advisor for a non-Indian,  
53 Museum Studies undergraduate who happened to  
54 land an internship at the NMAI. When she got the  
55 internship, both she and I were enthused at the  
56 opportunity. The clouds started building for both of  
57 us soon after her internship began. She e-mailed  
58 me<sup>5</sup>:

59 I’ve faced the experience of being considered  
60 “lesser” and even treated differently for being  
61 non-native. It’s been like being slapped in the  
62 face. I also have found out that native students  
63 are getting paid more than non-natives, which  
64 is frustrating mainly for the reason they didn’t  
65 tell anyone (I’m all about being up front and  
66 honest). These are things I often read and dis-  
67 cuss with you, but man, having it happen to me  
68 has been really annoying. I’m not one of those  
69 overly sympathetic non-natives or pessimistic  
70 jerky historians. I try to respect people as hu-  
71 man beings regardless, and if I can help get  
72 some voices heard in public history (black, na-  
73 tive, woman, whatever), then right on.  
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75 But, I’m sure maybe you’ve had experience in  
76 this and can maybe give me some advice. I’ve  
77 heard everything from “whites shouldn’t be  
78 curating” (no surprise to hear that) to a non-  
79 native NMAI employee (who also has experi-  
80 enced what I have) tell me about complaints  
81 from native staff members that there are “too  
82 many non-native interns.” One of the students  
83 . . . tells me her ultimate goal is to destroy mu-  
84 seums and to have all the objects back with “the  
85 people.” I wasn’t sure how to react. That mili-  
86 tant concept was quite beyond the usual  
87 “repatriation” attitude I’m familiar with.  
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89 We also met with [a key staff member] at the  
90 museum.<sup>6</sup> He was pretty blatant about his lack  
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1 of interest in the non-native contribution to the  
2 museum, and it really made me feel like I have  
3 no right, or place, to be here.

4 She was upset, not so much about the treatment,  
5 but puzzled about the why of it. She knows, in-  
6 tellectually, the roots of Indian anger at museums,  
7 anthropology, and history, and, as she notes, she  
8 supports increasing native voice and control in  
9 museums. Dealing emotionally with the exclusion  
10 she felt is another matter.

11 I can't speak for my student. If she has been lis-  
12 tening in my classes, however, she knows what I  
13 would say about the exclusion of nonnative voices  
14 from museums. No matter how unfair keeping In-  
15 dians from telling their own stories has been,  
16 having native voice be the *only* voice in Indian-fo-  
17 cused museums would be unfortunate. Ultimately,  
18 misinformation would continue and would be put  
19 onto exhibit labels and into programming by In-  
20 dians. Stereotypes now in place would be replaced  
21 with new ones, albeit Indian generated. Museums  
22 would remain as damaging to Indians as they ever  
23 were. I recall a statement from Susan Shown Harjo  
24 (1995) in an interview about repatriation and the  
25 at-that-time recently approved NMAI:

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27 It is really the beginning of native peoples  
28 writing history right for the first time, and  
29 taking control of what is said about us, and how  
30 we are portrayed, and what we say. From now  
31 on what we've really earned is the right to  
32 screw up as badly as the white people have.  
33 (Laughs) [in transcript of interview] And we  
34 will do that, I have no doubt.

35 I would reply that if Indians believe they will be  
36 "writing history right for the first time" they will be  
37 as mistaken as any other group that thought it had  
38 the truth. No group has a monopoly on truth about  
39 itself, no matter how much they might like to think  
40 so. Such self-delusion tends to be a mix of hubris  
41 and ethnocentrism as much as anything, and  
42 wanting to exclude other groups from telling their  
43 story is a common initial reaction in the decoloniz-  
44 ing process.

45 Telling an accurate story always requires multi-  
46 ple perspectives and voices, but getting to that  
47 point often is not easy because it means giving up  
48 at least some control of the storytelling process.  
49 Sometimes the problem can be with non-Indian  
50 museum audiences, as it was in my "white people

51 will believe anything" example. Non-Indians, here  
52 to include even African, Asian, Latino, and other  
53 Americans, especially those interested in Indians,  
54 often have at least a bit of "white guilt" about what  
55 happened to Indians that causes them to buy into  
56 an idea promoted by some Indians that everything  
57 that non-Indians have said about Indians must be  
58 wrong, that only Indians can represent native cul-  
59 ture authentically, and that only Indians have the  
60 real story about Indian heritage and culture. If  
61 these non-Indians would only give it serious  
62 thought, they would realize how impossible it is for  
63 a single person to have the whole story about the  
64 culture of which they themselves are a member. If  
65 you work with Indians long enough, one of the most  
66 common phrases you'll hear is that "I only speak for  
67 myself, not for anyone else in my tribe." Add the  
68 stunning diversity of American Indian cultures to  
69 the mix, and trying to tell an encompassing, au-  
70 thentic story becomes utterly impossible. Indians  
71 adamantly point out that their cultures aren't all  
72 alike, so if you can't tell a complete story of even one  
73 nation, how can you begin to tell the stories of all of  
74 them? To even get close to the latter, it takes an  
75 entire museum such as the NMAI, but even with  
76 NMAI, the initial reactions were highly critical,  
77 even from Indian people.<sup>7</sup> My Native American  
78 colleague took advantage of his audience by playing  
79 on their ignorance, their stereotypes, and their  
80 naiveté. He kept them "not very bright." Perhaps  
81 that's a form of just desserts for all that happened  
82 to Indians under colonization, but it isn't at all  
83 helpful. Museums, his audience, and Indians would  
84 be better served if he just said, "I don't know," in-  
85 stead of making something up.

86 I don't worry about my student who interned at  
87 the NMAI. She "has her head on straight" and has  
88 come back to do an internship at the Eiteljorg. As  
89 she thinks about her experiences on her way to be-  
90 coming a museum professional, they will provide  
91 insights to complex issues and attitudes she'll face  
92 if she stays in the Indian museum business. The  
93 biggest lesson she will have learned is that she  
94 really doesn't know much. I do worry about her fel-  
95 low NMAI interns, however, if they think that  
96 because they are Indians they have inside or better  
97 access to the truth than my student, and I'm  
98 equally concerned about their NMAI mentors if  
99 they also happen to believe it.<sup>8</sup> If they do, they'll be  
100 disrespecting their audiences as much as my col-

1 league did. My assumption—more a hope—is that  
2 when they actually start to work on the nuts and  
3 bolts of an exhibition or program they'll realize  
4 they don't know much either, will say "I don't  
5 know" when asked, and will find out from Indian or  
6 non-Indian people who might actually know.

7 The best Indian museums can be built; the best  
8 exhibitions can be assembled; the best programs  
9 can be organized; and the best staff members can  
10 be trained only if we abandon colonial views and  
11 associated stereotypes about Indians, dump notions  
12 of authenticity centered on the idea that you  
13 can't really know about Indians unless you are one,  
14 and really embrace the principle that cultural realities  
15 are complicated, multithreaded, and  
16 multivocal. I know that Paul Chaat Smith really  
17 didn't mean to insult me, nor did he really mean  
18 that I wasn't very bright because I am interested in  
19 Indians. Rather, he meant to tell me and his "not  
20 very bright" readers—the only ones likely to buy  
21 and read his book—that Indians are pretty darned  
22 complicated. As he said in an interview about the  
23 book, "It isn't about us talking and you listening:  
24 it's about an engagement that moves our collective  
25 understanding forward." What really matters is  
26 "whether we can build new understandings of what  
27 it means to be human in the twenty-first century"  
28 (Morris 2009). That's a useful perspective, one that  
29 will serve museums and the public better than  
30 some of the attitudes many of us apparently hold.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

1. I hope you'll actually read this note right after you read the title. I've never put a note on a title before, but I think it might be worth doing here. I realize this is in complete violation of the AAA style guide, but the copy editor and I couldn't find a better place to put it. For this paper, the journal's anonymous reviewers provided thoughtful and thought-provoking opinions. They were so good and well written that they could easily be publishable commentaries on my commentary. One reviewer noted that the essay seemed like an op-ed piece, which is exactly what I intended. After reading and pondering their comments, I've decided to leave the essay pretty much as I wrote and edited it. That doesn't mean I'm right and they are wrong or that my prose and reason are unassailable. Rather, the key points of the essay are relatively straightforward, and I see no need to over-analyze them as a couple of the reviewers seemed to suggest I should. To address some of their concerns, and maybe yours, this essay is not at all about reverse racism. I suppose it could be about racial-

ism, but must we always go there? I certainly do know that there is a complex history relating to the very idea of "Indian" and the relationship of Indians to museums, both too long to tell in an op-ed piece. Simply put, I am concerned about the self-perceptions of Indians and non-Indians and their views of each other within Native American-focused museums that complicate—if not mystify—notions of authenticity and truth.

2. Please understand that I am more than aware that some readers may be ill-at-ease at my interchangeable usage of Indian, Native, Native American, and American Indian. All of them have political connotations, but I will mostly use Indian for convenience as many Indians also do.
3. *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong* is the title of Paul Chaat Smith's (2009) new book of essays. On p. 70 he writes:

Generally speaking, white people who are interested in Indians are not very bright. Generally speaking, white people who take an active interest in Indians, who travel to visit Indians and study Indians, who seek to help Indians, are even more not very bright. I theorize that in the case of white North Americans, the less interest they have in Indians, the more likely it is that one (and here I mean me or another Indian person) could have an intelligent conversation with them.

4. Seriously, I've given talks with several Native American colleagues at the Eiteljorg. Don't bother trying to figure out who might have said this. That really isn't important. I suspect several of them could have said the same thing, but chose not to.
5. E-mail being what it is, I've editorially cleaned up some very minor bits of spelling and the like, but nothing to change the substance of the e-mail at all. She has had an opportunity to approve or disapprove my editing and usage. This e-mail is being used with her permission, and even though some will probably bother trying to figure out her identity, that is unimportant to the point of this commentary. Nor, really, is the "truth" behind any of her worries (about differential intern pay, for example). What might be important is her personality. She is very open, bright, observant, friendly, nonjudgmental, and upbeat, maybe to a fault, which is why her e-mail was so disturbing.
6. By now you should know that I'm going to tell you not to bother trying to figure out this person's identity either. Wasting time doing so misses the point.
7. See papers by both native and nonnative authors in *American Indian Quarterly* critiquing the NMAI, but especially those by Atalay (2006), Issac (2006), and Lone-tree (2006).
8. In fairness to the NMAI and to the Eiteljorg, I am more than aware that such attitudes are common among staff members at many Indian-focused museums. Both museums are real treasures for what they accomplish. Singling them out is just an accident of writing this comment.
9. In no way is the essay meant to be judgmental. There are historical reasons why certain attitudes exist, attitudes that will be tough to get rid of. Please realize that I don't think there is any "holier than thou" attitude here either. When I teach my Indians of North America class, the first

1 thing of substance I tell that them is that even though I  
 2 have studied, worked with, written about, and taught  
 3 about Indians for more than 30 years, I don't know any-  
 4 thing (I actually use a cruder word than that). What I do  
 5 is about moving my understanding forward, to para-  
 6 phrase Paul Chaat Smith.

7  
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59 Abstract

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 62 The core argument of this opinion is that in museums  
 63 focused on Native Americans, staff members must abandon  
 64 colonial and stereotypic views about Native Americans.  
 65 They also must challenge notions commonly held by Indians  
 66 and non-Indians that only Indians can provide authentic  
 67 information about Indians. Museums can accomplish this by  
 68 presenting cultural realities that are multithreaded, multi-  
 69 vocal, and complicated. [Keywords: Native Americans,  
 70 authenticity, multivocality]

