

Are Indians in America's DNA?

Dr. Monika Siebert and Marina Tyquiengco

Conversation

A conversation between Dr. Monika Siebert and Marina Tyquiengco on:

Americans

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Monika Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian: Multiculturalism and Contemporary Indigenous Art in North America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015.

About the Authors

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The 2018 National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) exhibition *Americans*, curated by Paul Chaat Smith and Cécile R. Ganteaume, takes on the trope of Indians within contemporary popular culture as well as history.¹ *Americans* presents a plethora of popular images of Native Americans and expounds on well-known figures and histories involving Native Americans: Thanksgiving, Pocahontas, the Battle of Little Bighorn, and the Trail of Tears. I first viewed the exhibition in Fall 2018 and was transfixed by the curators' expansive and thoughtful approach to the

proliferation of stereotypical Indian images. Later, after revisiting Dr. Monika Siebert's book, *Indians Playing Indian: Multiculturalism and Contemporary Indigenous Art in North America* (2015), I thought back to the exhibition and potential overlaps between the exhibition and her book. A conversation with Siebert about *Americans* seemed fitting as her book includes a full chapter on the first iteration of the permanent exhibitions of the NMAI.

This issue of *Contemporaneity*, titled "Yesterday's Contemporaneity," examines the relationships between artists and their present moments across a range of historical time periods. It aligns well with my concept for the conversation, thinking through an exhibition that suggests that Indian tropes might actually constitute a form of authenticity. The call for papers for this issue asked, "How can both history and modernity be visualized, contextualized, or conceptualized to create a sense of contemporaneity?" This question has a particularly provocative valence in the field of Native American art, which has long wrestled with distinctions between modernity and tradition, history and contemporaneity. This conversation with Dr. Monika Siebert engages this and other questions of the call. In thinking historically about Native American art, the immediate concept I draw upon is "the denial of coevalness," a phrase coined by anthropologist Johannes Fabian,² who used it as shorthand for his brand of anthropological critique—namely, that many white Euro-American anthropologists denied such coextensive being in time to their non-white subjects, placing them instead in an imagined past.³ In doing so, rather than genuinely approaching their ethnographic subjects as equals, anthropologists knowingly (or inadvertently) promoted colonial projects in the Americas and beyond. Fabian's concept exceeds the field of anthropology, but gestures toward a much larger issue: conceptualizing Indigenous⁴ peoples as "savage" or "primitive" obscures the history of distinct Indigenous people globally, some of whom learned Western law and customs in order to combat colonial encroachment.

Indians—meaning all Indigenous Americans—did not exist as a category of people prior to colonization. The term has been popularized over time due to a historical misunderstanding by Christopher Columbus that the island on which he landed was part of Asia, rather than part

¹ The title of this article comes from cover of gallery guide to *Americans* exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC. In the spirit of the National Museum of the American Indian's fourth museum, i.e. making their collections available far from DC, via the internet, there is a website for *Americans* that provides a digital version of the exhibition experience, including themed galleries: <https://americanindian.si.edu/americans/>.

² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

³ Ibid.

⁴ The word Indigenous is capitalized throughout the conversation. See Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style* (Edmonton: Brush Education Inc., 2018).

of a distinct landmass. Previously on the American continents were *peoples* who fought, traded, and coexisted.⁵ These peoples identified primarily with their specific tribe, clan, and/or community.⁶ Indians, as such, today exist as a diverse yet connected group because of their shared experiences of colonization and collective resistance. To paraphrase Chaat Smith, these diverse peoples had to learn to be Indian.⁷

Indians Playing Indians reminds readers that, under the umbrella term “Indians” in the contemporary moment, are still separate peoples who constitute separate nations. Native Americans have distinct interests and goals that overlap mainly through collective calls for recognition and sovereignty. Related to both the historic and contemporary challenges of sovereignty and racialization is Siebert’s concept of *multicultural misrecognition*, which she defines as “the substitution of cultural meanings for political meanings of indigeneity—that is the replacement of the concept of *indigenous nations* with that of *indigenous cultures* in contemporary popular, and often scholarly, discourse.”⁸ In a critique of multiculturalism from an Indigenous historical perspective, *Indians Playing Indians* details how contemporary artists have used their respective mediums to combat multicultural misrecognition and help mainstream society re-envision North America as consisting of distinct political entities: Indigenous nations (or First Nations) along with the United States and Canada.

In the introduction, “Indigeneity and Multicultural Misrecognition,” Siebert addresses the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in D.C. and its initial construction of the permanent galleries.⁹ There has been much criticism of the NMAI, including from prominent Ho-Chunk scholar Amy Lonetree, about the lack of indictment of colonization in these early exhibitions.¹⁰ Siebert, however, generally views the NMAI exhibitions positively for Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard’s expert curating and her ability to tell complex stories about colonization and continued life in the Americas. Rickard’s approach, as Siebert describes it, could not be further from *Americans*, which highlights the proliferation of Native American images in popular culture—as characters, mascots, toys, and advertisements. *Americans* demonstrates the copiousness of such stereotyped images of Indian particularity, the tropes, visualized and universalized, that continue to this day. In a deftly designed exhibition, these advertisement Indians appear both uncanny and completely quotidian as they grace familiar products in niches and posters, amid projections of Western films, in which Indians are played by non-Native American actors.

On March 23, 2019, Monika Siebert and I explored the exhibition together, dwelling most extensively in the main gallery of *Americans*, titled *Indians Everywhere*, and considering what narratives and strategies might be at play. We discussed the side galleries, titled *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, *The Queen of America*, *The Removal Act*, and *The Indians Win*. There is

⁵ Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁸ Monika Siebert, “Introduction: Indigeneity and Multicultural Misrecognition,” in *Indians Playing Indian: Multiculturalism and Contemporary Indigenous Art in North America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 2–3.

⁹ Monika Siebert, “Chapter 1: Indigeneity and the Dialectic of Recognition at the National Museum of the American Indian,” in *Indians Playing Indian*, 22–61.

¹⁰ Amy Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3/4 (2006): 632–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4139033>.

additional gallery space for reflection and viewer response. In this cacophony of Indian culture, my conversation with Siebert seeks to locate potential multicultural misrecognition and situate *Americans* in our contemporary understanding of Native Americans. We discussed what effects the surplus of Native Americans in images can potentially have on non-Native viewers' understanding of Native Americans as members of distinct nations. Our conversation focused on the exhibition design of *Americans* and how the curators' choices lead to specific understanding on the part of the viewers.¹¹ A multipage gallery guide in *Americans* invites visitors to "Use this guide to explore why Indians are in America's DNA."¹² Quoting from this text as the title to our conversation, we hope to unpack why the curators took such a surprising and effective approach to Native American history and culture.

Conversation

Marina Tyquiengco: *Indians Everywhere*, the entry-level gallery designed by Wendy Evans Joseph Architects, is both sleek and cacophonous in my opinion.¹³ I was reminded of a statement from your book when viewing this initial gallery. Contemplating the original installation you write that, "This message of fundamental Indian normativity, as opposed to inassimilable otherness, is further reinforced in many of the performances by contemporary American Indian artists invited regularly to the museum."¹⁴ Does this gallery fit what you mean by "fundamental Indian normativity" and an abundance of material culture (which you also discussed as a strategy of the museum)?¹⁵ Or, instead, is this material culture so paradoxically not Indian by being posed as American?

Monika Siebert: In "Indigeneity and the Dialectic of Recognition at the National Museum of the American Indian,"¹⁶ the first chapter of my book, I turned to the notions of the fundamental Indian normativity on one hand, and the dialectic of scarcity and abundance on the other, to describe some of the rhetorical strategies deployed in the NMAI Washington D.C. museum when it opened in 2004.¹⁷ The message of fundamental Indian normativity organized, to my mind, many of the inaugural film and performance offerings—such as, for example, Chris Eyre's film *A Thousand Roads* or a variety of concerts by contemporary Indigenous bands—

¹¹ The text below is an edited transcript of a conversation recorded in the café of the National Museum of the American Indian. It represents one hour of a much longer discussion about the exhibition and Siebert's work. The text has been edited for clarity and footnoted to provide readers with additional details and avenues for future exploration.

¹² Quotation from cover of gallery guide to *Americans* exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC.

¹³ For more information about the exhibition design, see Alan Michelson, "Designing Americans: A Conversation with Wendy Evans Joseph," *NAD NOW*, October 29, 2018, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.nadnowjournal.org/in-conversation/designing-americans-a-conversation-with-wendy-evans-joseph/>.

¹⁴ Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian*, 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22–61.

¹⁷ Abundance and scarcity working together is how Siebert conceptualized these early exhibitions to demonstrate the expansiveness of Native American culture and, simultaneously, all that has been lost/gone missing due to continued colonialism. See Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian*, 50.

and it aimed to counteract the idea of Indigenous peoples as belonging in the American past. It said, more or less: we are here, we have not disappeared, and while we retain our cultural distinctiveness, we conduct our daily lives amongst other Americans and often in very similar ways, living and working in both urban and rural areas, occupying contemporary professions, and so on. The claim of fundamental normativity concerned actual contemporary American Indian people, living in the twenty-first century.

To describe the ideological import of the objects featured in the inaugural exhibitions *Our Lives*¹⁸ and *Our Peoples*,¹⁹ objects that were selected out of the museum's enormous archive, I turned to the notion of the dialectic of scarcity and abundance, which I saw as a brilliant move by the curators to reconcile two seemingly conflicting narratives the museum was telling: one about the damages of ongoing colonialism and the other about Indigenous survival and adaptation. An abundance of the traces of historical material cultures was necessary to evidence survival and continuity, or survivance as Gerald Vizenor would have it, in order to support claims to tribal sovereignty.²⁰ The fragmentation of the material record testified to the tremendous destructive power of European and then American colonialism.

If the NMAI's original exhibits showcased objects from Indigenous material cultures, historical and contemporary, across the Americas, *Indians Everywhere* is interested above all in a subset of broader mainstream material culture of the United States, a vast collection of Indian images adorning . . . well . . . pretty much everything. Thus, we can still very much talk about normativity and abundance. The exhibition's central and intentionally provocative claim is that Indians are in the American DNA, thus they are not merely normative but constitutive. But, as the objects of exhibition changed so did the terms of the conversation, haven't they? What's normative here is the European and American fascination with "the Indian," representing the ideas about who the Indigenous people were, evidenced in the objects and images on display here, and the extent to which this concept and the images that forged it served U.S. American national mythmaking. If *Indians Everywhere* implies any dialectic, it would have to be one of the hypervisibility of Indian images and the invisibility of actual contemporary American Indian people, given the exhibition's opening question: "How is it that the Indians can be so present and so absent in American life?" We are talking about the perspective of the non-Native mainstream society, of course, the demographic that Chaat Smith and Ganteaume explicitly want to address with this exhibition, because American Indians certainly see themselves.

The question of "Is this material culture paradoxically not Indian?" is tricky. Because, the obvious answer is, of course, it's not. This is mainstream U.S. culture *in the process of deploying "the Indian" for the purposes of national cultural self-definition*. And yet, the obvious fact is that a lot of these objects show up in Indigenous lives, too, because American Indians

¹⁸ The exhibition *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities* was on view at the National Museum of the American Indian from September 21, 2004, to July 6, 2015. More information can be found here: National Museum of the American Indian, "Our Lives," accessed May 15, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=528>.

¹⁹ *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories* was also an inaugural exhibition on view from September 21, 2004, to January 5, 2014, at the NMAI D.C., exhibition description here: National Museum of the American Indian, "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories," accessed May 15, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=828>.

²⁰ See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1999).

live in the contemporary United States and participate in its daily, political, economic, social, and cultural rituals. American Indians buy Land O' Lakes Butter or Indian Spirit cigarettes; display reproductions of Edward Curtis's photographs or posters advertising Western films; catch a game of basketball or football; ride Indian motorcycles and drive Jeep Cherokees; fly Apache helicopters and deploy Tomahawk missiles, and so on.²¹ Historically, American Indian people have intentionally appropriated some of the popular culture's Indian images for a variety of reasons. Leaders of eastern seaboard nations donned Plains headdresses for their diplomatic missions to the federal government; Edward Curtis's stoic Indians showed up on American Indian Movement (AIM) t-shirts in the 1970s; contemporary American Indian visual artists continue to use archival and popular culture Indian images in their work.²² The stereotypes get reframed and reused by Indigenous peoples. American Indian people live surrounded by the very images that are on display here whether they embrace them or are offended by them. *So, to that extent, contemporary Indigenous material culture, too, is represented here.*

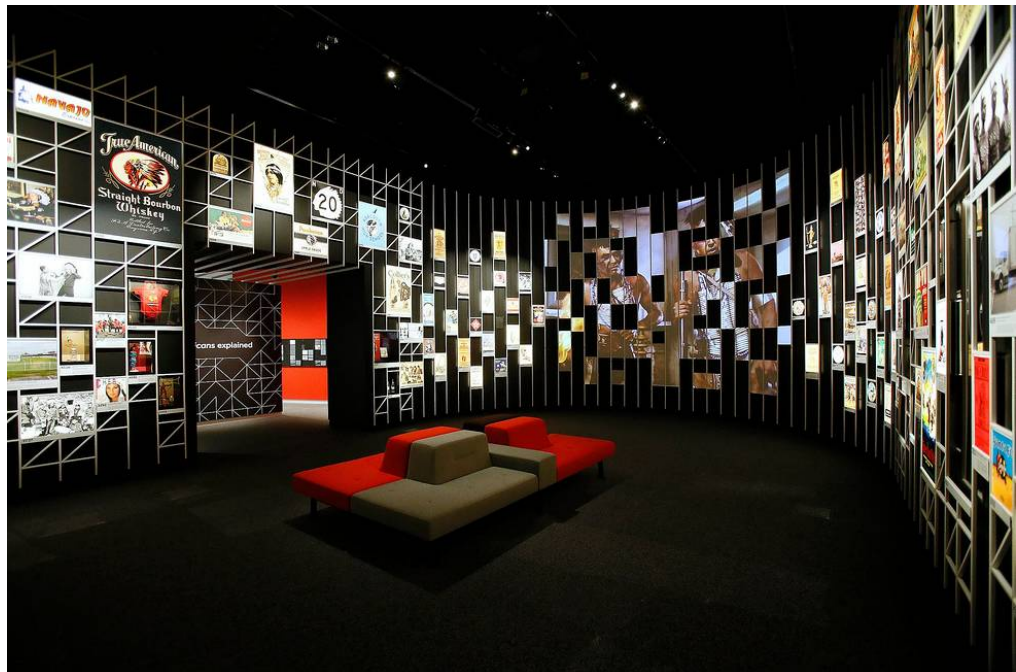


Figure 1

Paul Morigi/AP Images for National Museum of the American Indian, Installation View of central gallery, January 2018. Digital Photograph. National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

²¹ Edward Sheriff Curtis was amateur ethnographer and photographer best known for his extensive photographic folio, *The North American Indian* (1907–1930). These photographs have come to symbolize a particularly traditional, staged vision of American Indian life then thought to be heading toward extinction. Edward Sheriff Curtis's project has inspired exhibitions such as *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy*, *Zig Jackson*, *Wendy Red Star*, *Will Wilson* (Portland Museum of Art, February 6–May 8, 2016) and artistic projects such as Matika Wilbur's *Project 562*, documenting federally recognized tribes across the United States, <http://www.project562.com/>.

²² The American Indian Movement was an important civil rights movement of the 1970s inspired by the civil rights movement and the Black Power Movement. See Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like A Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996) for history of the movement. In the context of art, see Jessica Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

MT: This is a very interesting point, that Indigenous material culture is also represented in *Americans* through the overabundance of Indian images which are available to mainstream society. The circulation of these Indian images here has the potential to demonstrate how American Indians are Americans full stop.

In the galleries, we had a very productive conversation about the word 'cacophony.' By this I meant initially that in the *Indians Everywhere* gallery, I did not know exactly where to look and my concentration darted to all corners of the room filled with images. Discussing this gallery, you situated it into this mid-twentieth century lens to argue that it is meant to be explicitly modern rather than contemporary. This is an interesting tension with the aesthetics of clean modernism in a space so full of objects. Can you elaborate more on the experience of being in the exhibition?

MS: This was my first impression, that most of the images come from the mid-twentieth century and represent the American mass culture after the Second World War. When we actually looked at all the images in the *Indians Everywhere* hall, we discovered that there were reproductions created for the exhibition of images from the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, and even the seventeenth century, such as the early Virginia state seals, for example. But the overwhelming impression is that of the objects of the twentieth-century mass culture. Most images in the main hall evoke that period, when new technologies of reproduction facilitated ever wider and faster dissemination of Indian images. Thus, side by side with photos of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, and other politicians, in conversations with Indigenous politicians, or those of celebrities visiting reservations (Einstein among the Dine, for example), we have posters of cowboys and Indians advertising Cold War Westerns, posters featuring mascots in headdresses advertising sporting events, and numerous images advertising products of mass consumption (food, toys, clothing, and so on). With the exception of the films projected at the hall's far end, the main aesthetic appears to evoke analog rather than digital technology of image reproduction. Computers were being invented already during the Second World War, but the mid-twentieth century is still decades away from the digital saturation of daily life we experience now. It seems that, at least aesthetically, based on the products being advertised in the images on exhibition here, it is a Post-WWII moment that predominates, with occasional examples from the earlier centuries.

And, yes, you are right, the first impression is of both abundance and cacophony. There's so much here, we do not know where to look; all the objects draw us in, compete for our attention: the imperatives of advertising and of museum exhibition work in tandem. *Cacophony*, usually a negative term, meaning a discordant, unpleasant mixture of sounds, would describe this collection of objects as gathered together seemingly haphazardly, without discernible patterning or signposting to facilitate movement through the exhibition following a specific narrative. In a cacophonous collection, there's no origin, no progression, no telos. By contrast, abundance is typically positive, suggesting vibrancy and richness, testifying powerfully to the presence of something. When we want to make an argument about something taking place, we show a lot of examples. In *Indians Everywhere*, we do indeed literally see a lot of Indians everywhere around us and are invited to just experience the abundance first. This gallery borrows a rhetorical strategy already tested in other places in the museum, especially in the *Windows on Collections* rotating series of exhibits dispersed throughout the building (examples including arrowheads, dolls, beaded objects, clothing, tomahawks, and peace medals). These exhibits offer the objects in all their abundance and without apparent curatorial gloss; the captions and contextual information are available but not at hand, they have to be retrieved from digital screens or printed guides available nearby. In *Indians Everywhere*, rather than being offered a clear narrative to follow as we move

through the exhibition, *we are put into a universe of signification and left to our own devices to decode it.*²³

MT: That statement powerfully sums up the experience of the main hall of *Americans* for me, which I understood through the sense of cacophony. Yet, as we discussed, there is a tension between all the images that we might not understand as going together other than the presence of Native stereotype and the fact that so many of these products are so familiar.

MS: I think that *Indians Everywhere* invites affective rather than conceptual engagement, at least at first. There is no obvious way to begin touring this hall, other than by plunging *in medias res*, which suggests that the engagement with Indigenous peoples on the continent had been the fundamental, constitutive fact of American life, from its very beginning. This is then one meaning of the exhibition's provocative "Indians in American DNA" gambit. For the majority of contemporary museum visitors, this engagement typically involves Indian images—that is, stereotypes of Indianness dispersed throughout popular culture that mark our everyday lives in mundane ways, rather than contemporary American Indians themselves. And since the exhibition itself does not offer a starting point, we rely on what we recognize here to serve as a lens leading us through the exhibition. This is why so many of these images harken to the likely visual and affective landscapes of the visitors' childhood: the cowboy and Indian games, the Thanksgiving pageants, the Halloween costumes, the dress-up games of summer camps. These make up the core paraphernalia of American childhood, and they are all about Indians. The food products are another way to appeal to the viewers affectively through nostalgia. *Indians Everywhere* invites you to remember what food was on your childhood breakfast table and how it tasted or what mascots graced your sports and cheerleading outfits in high school or college. It is as if the hall was *recreating a world in which you have always been surrounded by Indian images that were taken for granted*, that did not demand any kind of examination, that were just there, an easy uncontested part of the American daily life. Before the debates over cultural appropriation began, before the Indian mascots and Pocahontas Halloween costumes became offensive.

MT: The nostalgic dimension of the exhibition is made more effective by its design. As we walked through the exhibition, making sense of this lack of narrative of progression, we considered several terms useful in understanding the exhibition layout such as two-dimensionality versus three-dimensionality, grid, frame, and analog.

MS: There is an interesting play between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality in *Americans*. All the objects in *Indians Everywhere* are exhibited in a way that unifies them, by flattening their surfaces and fitting them into a geometrical grid.²⁴ While the majority are images (posters, photographs, reproductions of paintings, and so on), those that are three-dimensional are set back in the walls behind a glass vitrine to maintain the flat surface of the exhibition walls. All are placed in square or rectangular metal frames, with a four-digit catalogue number, real or fake, attached. You saw here the influence of the Instagram aesthetic, an image with a little caption below, and a kind of standardized and industrial look

²³ There are gallery guides and several suggestions of ways to navigate the experience in its online page and through the guide. What we mean here is that there is no singular progression through the exhibition that is immediately apparent upon entering.

²⁴ With a few exceptions, most of the main gallery hall is lined with reproductions of advertisements, seals, posters, photographs, rather than with the original objects themselves. More information is available online at <https://americanindian.si.edu/americans/#gallery>.

to it. Even the exhibition hall itself is flat and rectangular, with only the wall opposite the entry curving into a half-spherical projection screen, that is nevertheless broken up into several smaller frames/screens repeating the overall network/grid-like pattern. All these frames, along with the blackness of the walls, evoke cinema and the associated ideas of framing and projection. However, there are also multiple entrances on each side of the hall leading into adjacent spaces, and thus suggesting depth, further dimensions beyond the flat walls of the main hall, and thus possible other ways to engage with the collections and the stories they might tell. These adjacent spaces contain galleries on Thanksgiving, Pocahontas, Trail of Tears, and the Battle of Little Bighorn as well as one gallery designed to facilitate visitors' responses to the exhibition. Unlike the main hall, where we experience an abundant cacophony, these themed galleries explicitly offer a linear way through their exhibits and a coherent narrative about their contents.

In *Indians Everywhere*, the objects are framed within a grid created out of metal, which invokes some dimensionality. In the Pocahontas gallery, titled *Queen of America*, this grid loses some of its geometry and dimension—it is painted on the wall—in order to evoke the early maps of Virginia, sketched by John Smith.²⁵ These maps were designed to raise funds for the Virginia Company by depicting the densely populated Virginian shore as a promising spot for a trading post with plenty of people to trade with and with functioning transportation networks, i.e., the rivers.²⁶ These maps were frequently reproduced and disseminated as the British colonial project unfolded. In the *Indians Everywhere* gallery, there are 350 plus images that seem to be collected not according to any particular logic other than their popularity. And while most of them are copies of original analog images, they are framed by a grid evoking the current era in which digital technology is the norm. So, mapping “America” and framing “the Indian” are highlighted here as the primary forms of our attempts to account for the historical and contemporary American engagement with Indigenous people. The exhibition now emerges as centrally interested in these very processes.

MT: I like this idea that the organizing principle is literal frames, because the *Indians Everywhere* gallery is made up of a metal framework of triangle forms and they frame all the images and the cachets of smaller images. In each little enclave is an object that is literally framed by metal and conceptually framed by our experiences with it.

MS: We talked about the *Indians Everywhere* design before we went into the *The Indians Win* gallery (on the Battle of Little Big Horn). Now we know that the main hall in a way prepared us for the insight *The Indians Win* offers about the emergence of mechanical reproduction and the proliferation of Indian images. In the late nineteenth century, there was an acceleration of the reproduction of images, which the curators trace back to the invention of the stereotype. The stereotype was originally a mode of mechanical reproduction of images and then it becomes a concept designating a cliché; that is, an idea repeated so often and disseminated so widely that it is taken for truth. Taking this idea back to the main hall, we can now reflect on how even though each image is unique, the idea is repeated, the underlying grid suggesting the possibility of infinite reproduction and dissemination. The cacophonous abundance of images resulting from these new technologies ends up constituting the lived reality of the American experience; we are back in the dark projection room filled with images of Indians.

²⁵ For a summary of information on Captain John Smith's early maps, see “Smith Maps,” *National Park Service*, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/cajo/learn/smith-maps.htm>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

MT: *The Invention of Thanksgiving* film takes up an entire gallery near the entrance of the exhibition. The film is a graphic depiction of Paul Chaat Smith's musings on Thanksgiving. In the film, despite its title, Chaat Smith does not really provide any clear history of Thanksgiving, but instead a graphic depiction of what it could potentially mean. Could you perhaps respond to it?

MS: What Paul Chaat Smith does in this particular short segment stands in sharp relief against other recent video responses to Thanksgiving by Indigenous people, such as, for example, the *Teen Vogue* educational video "Native American Girls Describe the REAL History Behind Thanksgiving (2016)," made available on social media every Thanksgiving.²⁷ At the end of this video, a tribally diverse group of young American Indian women overturn the Thanksgiving table in front of the camera, scattering its proverbial abundance, in a gesture of rejection of the very idea of Thanksgiving. At the end of *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, Chaat sits at the Thanksgiving table with everybody else and says that he would rather be there than not be there. It is a fundamentally different rhetorical gesture, and one repeated throughout *Americans*.

MT: Since you teach at the University of Richmond, I thought that the *Queen of America* gallery on Pocahontas would be a particularly interesting space to discuss. Pocahontas's image is omnipresent, but specifics of her and her life are unknown by the general public. President Trump continues to use Pocahontas as a nickname for Massachusetts Senator and 2020 presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren who claims Native American ancestry.²⁸ You are soon publishing an article on Pocahontas.²⁹ I learned from you that Pocahontas has had an interesting history with the tribe of which she was historically a member, the Pamunkey Indian Tribe.³⁰ Can you discuss your article and the overlap with the images of Pocahontas reproduced in this exhibition?

MS: The essay, titled "Pocahontas Looks Back and then Looks Elsewhere," originated with an invitation from Gerald McMaster to speak at "The Entangled Gaze: Indigenous and European Views of Each Other" conference at the Art Gallery of Ontario and OCAD University in Toronto in 2017.³¹ It allowed me to bring together two long-standing interests: contemporary visual appropriations of Pocahontas, on one hand, and the work of Mohawk artist Shelley Niro, on the other. I was particularly intrigued by a specific formal feature of her 2003 short film *The*

²⁷ *Teen Vogue*, "Native American Girls Describe the REAL History Behind Thanksgiving," YouTube, November 23, 2016, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7jLeBWMAOU>.

²⁸ Doina Chiacu, "Senator Warren, mocked by Trump as 'Pocahontas,' says DNA test backs her ancestry," Reuters, October 15, 2018, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-warren/senator-warren-mocked-by-trump-as-pocahontas-says-dna-test-backs-her-ancestry-idUSKCN1MP110>.

²⁹ Monika Siebert, "Pocahontas Looks Back and then Looks Elsewhere: The Entangled Gaze in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Ab-Original: Journal of Indigenous Studies and First Nations' and First Peoples' Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019): 207–26.

³⁰ To learn more about the Pamunkey Indian Tribe, see its official website: <http://pamunkey.org/>.

³¹ More information about this conference can be found on its page: OCAD University and the Art Gallery of Ontario, "The Entangled Gaze: Indigenous and European Views of Each Other," accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.entangledgaze.ca/>.

Shirt,³² a piece that I have used in my classes to illustrate some of the central issues involved in thinking about Indigenous nations through the prism of multiculturalism versus via the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. The film intertwines two series of panning shots: the first of natural landscape and the second of a woman (played by the contemporary visual artist Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie) who either looks directly at the camera, at times with her eyes obscured by reflective glasses, or turns to the side revealing her profile in a gesture that mimics the stoic Indian familiar from Curtis photographs or from the Indian nickel and that is present in so many of the images displayed here in *Indians Everywhere*. What interested me in particular, however, was the very first thirty seconds of the film, before Tsinhnahjinnie assumes the first "Indian pose," a brief moment when she can be observed looking off to the side, beyond the frame of the camera, laughing with someone that we do not get to see, at all, ever. Given the obvious cultural capital of looking back at the camera to assert subjectivity and expose the various investments of the viewers' gaze, what is the power of looking not just away from the camera but altogether elsewhere? Why engage the viewers only to point out their exclusion from an implied but invisible physical universe and its joyous circle of sociality? What could be the rhetorical potential of that looking elsewhere in terms of the issues of privacy, agency, sovereignty, and in the context of historical representations of Indigenous women?

The numerous portraits of Pocahontas allowed me to bring a historical dimension to my thinking about Niro's contemporary work. Pocahontas is likely the most depicted Indigenous historical figure in North America. I live and teach in Virginia, where political and cultural claims to Pocahontas are on display everywhere. My essay traces a historical genealogy of Pocahontas in the act of looking and the cultural expediency of the direction of her gaze at specific historical junctions—from the 1616 Simon van de Passe's engraving made when she was in London,³³ through other iconic images: the friezes and paintings included in the Capitol's Rotunda, the Senate Chambers, the Virginia Historical Society, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. You see them all in the gallery here as well because these portraits of Pocahontas have been foundational to the national self-definition in the United States; they are part of the national DNA, to use Chaat Smith's formulation again. We do not have much at all in terms of a historical record of the actual Powhatan woman who lived in the early seventeenth century, a pivotal moment in the history of this continent. But we can learn a lot about the United States and ourselves as Americans by studying how her image gets appropriated throughout the subsequent centuries by variety of political constituents, from the federal government to Indigenous peoples themselves. The evidence is in the artwork they fund, including the historical friezes and paintings in the Capitol Rotunda and in the National Portrait Gallery, curatorial endeavors such as *Americans* here at the NMAI, exhibits of contemporary Indigenous art in tribal cultural centers as well as non-native exhibition spaces throughout the country, even in local initiatives such as the Pocahontas Reframed Storytellers Festival that is now in its third year in Richmond, Virginia.³⁴ What does it mean, then, for Pocahontas to be looking back at her viewers, as she does in van de Passe's portrait or to be looking down or away from

³² beachside bar, "Shelly Niro: The Shirt," YouTube, November 7, 2017, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx2lkFUJAY4>. The piece has been purchased by the National Gallery of Canada, see The National Gallery of Art, "Shelley Niro the Shirt," <https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/the-shirt>.

³³ The image referred to here is Simon Van de Passe's engraving of Pocahontas from 1616; more information here: <https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/life-portrait-pocahontas>.

³⁴ More information on the festival as part of the Evolution 2019 programing in Virginia from the NMAI magazine can be found at <https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/virginias-pivotal-year>.

them, as she does in the famous John Gatsby Chapman painting *The Baptism of Pocahontas* (1839).³⁵ And to connect Niro to Pocahontas: What does it mean for Pocahontas' late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century evocations to engage in the various iterations of this entangled gaze.

MT: As we talked, you mentioned learning about the exhibition from the curators. An important point was starting from the place of knowledge of the potential viewer might already have. When you enter the *Queen of America* gallery, there is video of people responding to who and what they thought Pocahontas was, none of whom claim a particular connection to the Pamunkey people. I wonder if we might revisit the idea that what the museum visitors already know impacts their understanding of the show.

MS: The curator Paul Chaat Smith has suggested on several occasions speaking in advance of the *Americans* opening that the primary rhetorical strategy is to meet the visitors where they are in terms of exposure to American Indians—that is, in this mainstream American culture saturated with Indian stereotypes. The curators saw this approach as a corrective to the rhetorical strategies of the inaugural exhibitions. I was a fan of the inaugural exhibitions for the way they managed to articulate a critique of the ongoing U.S. colonialism in the very space—a federally funded Smithsonian Institution museum on the National Mall—designed to conceal it, and to foreground the issue of tribal sovereignty evidenced by the historic treaties with the U.S. federal government. Supporting these political relationships was the original imperative of the museum, but after a decade, the curators realized that the inaugural exhibitions did not have the desired effect, the visitors often expressing confusion and frustration with the museum. According to Chaat Smith the museum's mission continues to be the fostering of tribal sovereignty. The museum's director, Kevin Gover, believes that the more Americans know about American Indians the more likely they will be in the future to engage in democratic decisions on behalf of Indigenous peoples and their nations. *Americans* represents this new approach, educating the American public about the historical and current realities of Indigenous lives in the United States.

Thus, *Indians Everywhere*, the hallway through which we enter *Americans* emphatically greets the viewers with the cacophony of abundant Indian images familiar from American popular culture. It even offers comfortable large sofas in the very center of the hall inviting the visitors to sink in, look around, recognize, and reminisce. We see this strategy replayed in the Pocahontas gallery, which begins with a short video comprised of the interviews with random people encountered on the street responding to a question about what they know about Pocahontas. It turns out that they know not much at all beyond the stereotypes evoked by the most iconic of her images. And only from there, once we are reassured by witnessing others whose limited knowledge might reflect our own, we move to the more complicated and historically accurate stories unfolded in the gallery's layered central narrative. As you noted, in the Pocahontas gallery, we move in reverse, we start with the contemporary stereotypes and then uncover the actual history the stereotypes have obscured, to the extent that it is recoverable, of course.

³⁵ More information on Gatsby Chapman's painting can be found here: <https://www.aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/baptism-pocahontas>.



Figure 2

Paul Morigi/AP Images for National Museum of the American Indian, Installation View of the Queen of America Gallery, January 2018. Digital Photograph. National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

The same logic governs the gallery on Indian removal, with its opening evocation of a familiar cultural trope about to be revealed as obscuring a much different historical truth: "Trail of Tears: Not What You Think. Not Even Close."³⁶ The exhibit begins where the viewers are: Trail of Tears was a traumatic historical event that befell the Cherokee Nation and changed them irrevocably; it was about them, the Indians, rather than us, the Americans. The exhibition teaches us to see this specific event in the broader context of Indian removal as a federal policy, implemented at great costs and massively transformative to both the Indigenous nations that suffered displacement *and* to the United States. The ultimate takeaway is an understanding that Indian removal foundationally created the United States as we know it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³⁷

And we see yet another version of this very strategy at work again in *The Indians Win*. You know, for me one of the nice surprises of our walk through today was in this gallery. I think we both realized things there that we did not realize before, on our previous visits here.

MT: *The Indians Win* is an exceptional gallery because it is really the only space where we can see objects three dimensionally, in the round.

MS: Yes! This is where we get the most classic ethnographic museum approach in the display of the Plains headdress, which is also the most iconic Indian object in American culture, as the *Indians Everywhere* gallery has already abundantly demonstrated. But if the main hall offered an abundance of various examples in a cacophonous display, as you noted, *The Indians*

³⁶ National Museum of the American Indian, "Trail of Tears: Not What You Think Not Event Close," accessed May 15, 2019, <https://americanindian.si.edu/americans/#stories/the-removal-act>.

³⁷ Ibid.



Figure 3

Paul Morigi/AP Images for National Museum of the American Indian, Installation View of the Indians Win Gallery, Digital Photograph, January 2018, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

Win sets out to explain how it became so. Again, we start with the generally familiar: iconic objects displayed in a conventional way that further enhances their status as treasures. On the first quick visit, I was so taken by the beauty and the preciousness of these objects themselves, that I hardly noticed anything else (thus reducing broader historical and political meanings of Indigenous lives to an example of material culture, a process usually facilitated by the conventional ethnographic or art gallery exhibitionary practices). This time, together we paid attention to the historical connection the gallery makes between the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn and the era's technologies of communication such as the telegraph and technologies of mechanical reproduction of images and thus also ideas: the stereotype in both of its meanings. In the curators' framing, the defeat of General Custer at Little Bighorn that shocked the country marks the origin point of a process leading from the actual Plains headdress to the abundance of "Indian head" images in American culture; a process facilitated by ever-newer media accelerating the dissemination of images, from stereotypes advertising Wild West Shows, to moving pictures and first silent westerns, to radio and *The Lone Ranger* broadcasts, to television and its "Indian head test" and *Bonanza*, all the way to the twenty-first-century film and video game westerns. *Indians Everywhere* offers further examples of the byproducts of this process, including mid-twentieth-century beauty pageant contestants sporting headdresses with the gusto of today's Victoria Secret runway models.

But I also appreciated another point made in *The Indians Win*: that these new technologies replaced earlier, specifically Indigenous modes of recording and disseminating information, modes that themselves were undergoing historical adaptation. In a wonderful evocation of similarity, next to each other are exhibited a large-scale reproduction of a page from an American newspaper and an actual late nineteenth-century Lakota painting, the latter evoking the aesthetic properties of a Lakota winter count, of ledger book drawings, and of the newspaper next to it. Winter counts offer narratives of historical events unfolding over the course of decades via images traced on bison skin in a circular pattern. The Lakota painting is on canvas, in the ledger book style, but in a format that echoes the vertical arrangement of the newspaper columns. When you see those two together you realize that you are looking at two technologies for dissemination of information, both of them in the process of transformation. It's a truly arresting juxtaposition, further enhanced by the fact that fragments

of the Lakota painting are copied as if stenciled off but in larger scale on yet another wall of the gallery; more reproduction, more dissemination, more copies of copies.

MT: The proliferation of images in the *Indians Everywhere* gallery leads us back to conversation about starting from the visitor's place of knowledge and moving from there. The exhibition could have started with the idea of Little Bighorn as the beginning of the mechanical reproduction of Indian images, but the curators do not present that history in the main gallery.

MS: Right. First, they stage/engineer the affective encounter with the images that are so familiar to us. *Indians Everywhere* invites us to stop and recognize where we are, to assess our expertise, we could say, to feel like we can engage productively here because we do know something, we do recognize many of these exhibited objects, we even have things to say about them. Then eventually, we notice the entrances to the additional exhibition spaces and go on to explore what lies behind the flatness of the main hall and of the images it displays. We realize ultimately, one hopes, that these images have been obscuring something far more interesting all along.

MT: But to what extent does this new conception skirt the danger of multicultural misrecognition, given its central focus on the iconic images and the stereotypes they promulgate?

MS: I coined this term, *multicultural misrecognition*, to describe a particular side effect of multiculturalism with respect to contemporary Indigenous peoples in North America.³⁸ It's generally accepted today that the United States and Canada are multicultural democracies, that is, nation-states in which culturally distinct groups coexist, bound together by their common allegiance to a specific political ideal: representative democracy. What's less known is the fact that this model of national cohesion obscures the historical status of Indigenous peoples as citizens of their sovereign nations along with the history of their colonization. To put it differently, multiculturalism understands American Indians as ethnic minorities (or racial minorities as you noted earlier) on the par with other ethnic/racial minorities that make up the multicultural nation—African Americans, Asian Americans and so on, the categories familiar from the U.S. population census. What is being misrecognized is a particular political history and current status of Indigenous nations. Instead, multiculturalism celebrates essentialized cultural difference, conveniently encapsulated in iconic images.

I do not think that *Americans* makes a multiculturalist argument on behalf of Indigenous people, historical or contemporary; there's nothing here that frames them as Native Americans, that is, as one of the several distinct ethnic/racial/cultural groups constituting the nation. In fact, the contemporary American Indians are pretty much absent from this exhibition (to learn about them we have to travel to other floors of the museum). When amongst the abundance of Indian images on display, we come across exhibits relating to actual Indigenous people, they hail from the past: Pocahontas, the Cherokee of the removal era, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne victorious at Little Bighorn. Instead the exhibition declares that Indians

³⁸ See Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Jeff Chang, *Who We Be: A Cultural History of Race in Post-Civil Rights America* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

are Americans, period, no hyphenation required. This claim, it seems to me, presses the point that American Indians are constitutive rather than complementary to “America.” I recall that Chaat Smith titled one of his talks about the exhibition something along the lines of, “The Most American Thing Ever is in Fact American Indians,”³⁹ meaning perhaps that the most globally recognizable iconic images from the continent have historically featured Indians. And then we have “Indians are in your DNA,” as a kind of a dare. If you distill America to its foundational principles, you actually get Indians. This statement has multiple valences, too. The vast collection of Indian images spanning centuries, along with the historical narratives on Pocahontas, on Indian removal, and on Indian Wars, testifies that a long engagement—political, military, economic, social, cultural—with Indigenous peoples inhabiting the continent foundationally shaped the eventual American people and their nation states. It also suggests that the imaginative engagement with Americans’ ideas of who the Indians are continues to shape their identities and their (mis)understanding of American history.

MT: I keep wrestling with that quote, “Indians are in your DNA,” from the gallery guide in the *Indians Everywhere* gallery. Because Indians being foundational in/to Americanness does not mean that all Americans are Indian. I realize the power of that phrase yet it’s such a provocation and a statement about non-Indigenous people claiming that they are Indian.

MS: Precisely! This rhetorical dare seems to both rescue and condemn Senator Warren: yes, Indians are, indeed, in her DNA, and no, she is not Indian. But it also risks a misunderstanding, and thus fully elucidates the dangers of this exhibition’s central gambit. The provocative thought is that, if Indians are in your DNA, then everybody is an Indian, including Elizabeth Warren, right? How many visitors’ will walk away with the nuanced understanding of both the foundational role of Indigenous peoples to the formation of the United States, in political and cultural terms, and the unique political relationship (usually referred to as the government-to-government relationship) of Indigenous nations to the federal government, and how many will walk away with new arguments to dismiss tribal sovereignty and citizenship, since we are all Indians anyway?

“Indians in your DNA make you American not Indian” is how I understand the import of all the genetic metaphors. Indians are in American DNA means that the historical encounter with Indigenous peoples here already had been foundational to the emergence of what we call America and Americans. Indians and Europeans together birthed the Americans, in that sense. This reading reminds me of Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous frontier thesis, the idea that the process of settling the continent—a process involving temporarily “going native”—forged a specifically American character. But I’m also reminded of Jolene Rickard’s curating of the inaugural exhibition *Our Peoples*, which insisted on not forgetting the historical circumstances of that birthing—that is, conquest and colonization. Rickard was particularly interested in how to frame these events from an Indigenous point of view and within Indigenous historical timeline in an institution premised on the centrality of the West. Her specific curatorial choices framed American history within, and bookended by, Indigenous hemispheric history. Indians in American DNA frames American experience within an Indigenous historical timeline, too. But unlike Rickard’s inaugural gallery, which was very much about the historical Indigenous peoples, *Americans* puts the American history and culture at the center, even as it rehearses over and over the notion of the constitutive role that Indians (as people and images) had in shaping that history and culture.

³⁹ Chaat Smith’s talk was at the Walker Art Museum on September 20, 2017, and is available online, see Paul Chaat Smith, “The Most American Thing Ever is American Indians,” Walker Art Museum, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/paul-chaat-smith-jimmie-durham-americans-nmai-smithsonian>.

MT: When you enter *Americans*, you are presented with Indians as cultural figures. You only later arrive at political histories. What is interesting here is that through this exhibition we can arrive at situation where it's not either/or; we can get a cultural sense and then a political sense.

MS: Yes; though the focus of the exhibition is the importance of Indians (again, as people and as images) in shaping American culture, *Americans* also makes available events from the political/diplomatic history on the continent, exhibits that recount the wars conducted, treaties negotiated, and legislative acts passed. To my mind, *Americans* also makes the point, perhaps only inadvertently that the Indians as cultural figures proliferate perhaps because they so effectively obscure the political histories of Indigenous nations. And this is a wild paradox, given that the central iconic image here is one or another version of the Plains warrior (in his headdress of course!), a figure that harks back to the Indian Wars of the late-nineteenth century and thus also the history of conquest and colonization. That's crazy, isn't it? A historian, Daniel Immerwahr, has just published a book titled *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, and even though he rewrites U.S. history via the lens of its overseas colonies, I wonder if it might help shed light on the internal ones as well and thus this very paradox. To learn more about the political dimensions of Indianness at the NMAI, one needs to leave *Americans* and go upstairs to explore *Nation to Nation: Treaties between the United States and American Indian Nations*, an extensive and meticulous exhibition on historic treaties, tribal sovereignty, federal recognition, and all matters pertaining to the historic and contemporary Indigenous nations.⁴⁰

Back at the *Americans* galleries, the iconic image of an Indian in a headdress, once returned to its proper context as it is in *The Indians Win*, certainly allows us to recover the history of colonialism. I wonder though if that's the message the visitors' ultimately take away. The solitary Indian figure, often just the Indian head in a headdress, recalls such once-popular phrases deployed to capture the gist of the Indian predicament as "the last of," "the vanishing race," and "the end of the trail." The sheer numbers and range of contexts in which the Indian head image gets deployed suggests its tremendous cultural capital. "This image has taken deep root in American culture; it has crowded out all the other historical and contemporary images of American Indians, such as those of the diplomats featured in *Nation to Nation*, for example, or the images of American Indian people going about their life in their communities, reservation and off, of American Indian artists creating their art, and so on, all on display everywhere at the museum. As it builds its case about the Indians in America's DNA, *Americans* also urgently asks us to reflect more deeply on the reasons for and ramifications of our abiding attraction to Indian images.

MT: The call to question Americans' attachment to Indian imagery is such a poignant way to conclude our discussion. Thank you for your time, I have gained a lot from our conversation and exploration of *Americans*.

MS: Marina, thank you for the invitation to visit *Americans* together; and thank you for your questions, your insight, and for this engaging conversation.

⁴⁰ There is also an associated exhibition catalogue: Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington, DC: NMAI and Smithsonian Books, 2014).



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