

Chapter 8

Cultural Conflict: The Stories Dioramas Tell and Don't Tell



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Debates over who is authorized to speak for whom, and about what, have created a sometimes disquieting and sometimes exhilarating dialogue over the politics of representation. One person's lexicon of translation and analysis may be another person's lexicon of anguish. (Dubin 2010, p. 479)

8.1 Introduction

This chapter treats dioramas somewhat differently than do the other chapters in this book. As in other chapters, we begin with the benefits of dioramas—their value to learning and teaching, and other advantages they offer. We go on, however, to address some problematic aspects of dioramas: their power to represent cultural conflict and their historical misrepresentation of cultural realities.

I have been interested in natural history dioramas throughout my life. As a biologist and science educator, I fell in love with dioramas as a young girl in New York City, repeatedly visiting the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Growing up, I visited museums and was comfortable with the reality they presented and their prompts to tell myself stories, which encouraged me to lose myself in their landscapes and the imaginal realms I might never see in real life. I still enjoy them today.

Since their origins as 'cabinets of curiosity,' dioramas have occupied a noble place in natural history studies. They inform people of things they would otherwise never see; they foster conservation, civic mindedness, pride, and other values; and they provide insights into new dimensions and imaginings. Dioramas are designed

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to spark your imagination and help you think in different ways, and to represent new and/or unfamiliar realities.

...[for] at least one brief moment you “see through” (the root meaning of the word diorama), as though you were actually there, directly witnessing an event or a moment that could have, really could have, existed somewhere in the real world. (McPhee. In Diep, 2012)

At the American Museum of Natural History, for example, dioramas were created to make people become aware of, and develop a wish to protect, wildlife in general and vanishing species and habitats in particular. Dioramas seem like an excellent medium for telling stories and revealing aspects of nature not readily available to the ordinary citizen. Kutner said this of dioramas in natural history museums:

Dioramas arose in the late 1800s, largely out of a desire to return to nature following the Industrial Revolution. “These are what you might call the earliest version of virtual reality,” says Stephen Quinn... long-time diorama artist at the AMNH. The displays consist of taxidermed animals, foreground props and artfully painted panoramic backgrounds. More than just works of art, dioramas are true to science; for decades, artists and scientists went into the field to collect specimens and their surroundings and replicate them exactly as they appeared. (2015)

This is the wonder and beauty of natural history museums, whose role has for centuries ranged from preservation and conservation to education, advertisement and outreach. Their job was to save and preserve, collect and maintain. As Thompson (2005) has explained:

The hey-day of collecting was probably the Victorian age, when collectors fanned out across the globe, risking life and limb, usually without much regard to the sensibilities of the country and people involved, to bring back literally everything they could find. Such blanket collecting—taking the common with the rare, and a few of each species, instead of carefully targeted, statistically valid sampling—is unfashionable now.

Yet, while natural history museums focused primarily on collection, native habitats, biomes, endangered species, conservation and similar concerns, they also included cultural exhibits that portrayed so-called ‘primitive,’ indigenous, or enslaved peoples and their artifacts.

When the goal is conservation, either of near-extinct species or habitats, there appears to be a double goal of not only allowing the public to witness what they might otherwise never see in real life, but also advocating for the conservation of the exhibited entity. This double goal seemingly works well for endangered species and habitats, but is problematic when applied to indigenous peoples.

Many museums have endeavored to catch up with new cultural norms, but there is no consensus about how to appropriately portray indigenous or enslaved people. Similarly, for the South African Bushmen, there was a perceived need for “collecting the remnants of the ‘vanishing race. As Indians were hunted, forcibly moved, or educated in special schools across the United States, there was fear that their ‘cultural objects’ would disappear. Then, the race was on to collect artifacts before it was too late (Dubin 2007). Hence, the title of this chapter refers to the current challenges regarding what to represent in dioramas.

8.2 Contested Realities: Racism and Cultural Hegemony

Indigenous knowledge systems worldwide generally embody a more holistic understanding of the natural world than do Western scientific knowledge systems... Indigenous perspectives, however, have been highly marginalized among scientific communities and are infrequently addressed (Tolbert 2015, p. 5).

I use the above quote to situate the ways in which indigenous knowledge has been minoritized in schools and in museums (Ash *in preparation*; Aikenhead and Michell 2011; Chinn 2007).

It is fitting to highlight this current tension/conflict within natural history museums that calls into question the perceived value of indigenous artifacts and by proxy their knowledge systems. This tension is engendered in many ways but one of the most obvious is the juxtaposition of indigenous cultural and human remains with traditional natural history dioramas. Such placement leaves the impression that indigenous people are animalistic, or perhaps that primitive cultures are similar to animal cultures. This sentiment is captured in the quote below:

Natural history museums...house amazing dinosaur fossils, exotic hissing cockroaches, and wondrous planetariums—right next to priceless human-designed art and artifacts created by Native peoples of the Americas. Like me, you might wonder why these designed objects are juxtaposed with objects of nature such as redwood trees and precious metal exhibits... (Hadal 2013)

Many hold the worldview that such intermixing of animal and human remains and artifacts is 'normal'. For others, this is sacrilege (Lonetree 2012). Viewing humanity as a hierarchical sorting, with white at the top and people of colour at the bottom, is a historical phenomenon (Kendi 2016), which in the United States pre-dates slavery, and which exists across the world where colour, religion, language, wealth or other similar divisive factors prevail. We have seen the practical outcome of such conflict in racist historical and contemporary representations of African-Americans, Native Americans, and South African Bushmen who are often represented as less human than whites, in museums. Such racist views have been reflected in the three case studies of dioramas we will discuss.

Indigenous people portrayed in such insensitive ways have long contested how their ways of life, spirituality, and art have been represented (Dartt-Newton 2009; Lonetree 2009). They argue that the 'less than' status, that is projected on them, conveys dominant power and hegemony, past colonialism, racism and deficit ideology (Gorski 2010). Indigenous peoples ask museums to transform such worldviews arising from Western European-American colonialism (Lonetree and Cobb 2008). This may not be simple to achieve as any entrenchment of power is difficult to change. Conflict inevitably comes up against issues of power, hegemony, colonialism, and ownership (Dubin 2009).

8.3 Three Case Studies of Cultural Conflict within Dioramas

Here, we review three specific examples of diorama conflicts: two indigenous cultures—the Native Americans and South African Bushmen—as well as a less widely acknowledged controversy regarding the portrayal of African Americans. These controversies have been continuous, contentious, and informative. In each, first I examine the physical appearance of the diorama and its implied message, and then explore the particular perspective used in its design. These perspectives influence, if not determine, the message or story of each diorama.

The messages conveyed by dioramas of Native Americans, African Americans, and South African Bushmen, whether focused on science, anthropology, culture or archaeology, were typically authored by their designers, collectors, and curators, typically not with the indigenous peoples or African-Americans. Dioramas depicting indigenous or enslaved people were originally designed to convey selected aspects of past or present cultures; typically containing models of actual people, everyday objects, such as pottery or shoes, and a background meant to capture a particular moment in history. The messages imparted by such depictions have been both implicit and explicit, and they may or may not be culturally sensitive towards their subjects. They may be old messages that have been passed along from earlier decades, without any attempt to revise their effect. As Diep (2014) suggests “These beautiful, 50- or 100-year-old dioramas are a holdover—and a subconscious reminder—of some of the worst moments in U.S. history.”

Some stories are partially printed on signs and labels, told by docents, or by audio recordings or videos. Others are more implicit or suggestive, using placement selection of particular objects and mementos as cues. Those creating dioramas strive to have everyday visitors (mostly white, middle class, and of European ancestry) get in touch with phenomena they can no longer experience. Often the depictions are of situations or people that may soon disappear or are already gone. Some depictions are often overly romanticized or nostalgic; others are brutally honest.

Older cultural dioramas often conveyed messages tending to portray seemingly ‘content’ people frozen in a historical moment in time, but also ‘less than advanced’ modern culture. This message was grounded in the perspective of the European-American, typically upper-class white explorers and collectors who bought, stole, arranged, and interpreted the things they saw. In the United States, these views have often echoed larger master narratives, such as the heroic conquest of the west, the civilization of primitive people, and the overcoming of numerous obstacles to obtain nationhood, statehood, and especially, to obtain and keep land as property.

Many important details, such as rape, pillage, rampant disease, and forced religious conversions were omitted from these heroic messages (Lonetree and Cobb 2008). These brutal facts certainly pertain to the histories of the American Indian, African Bushmen, and African American, but are rarely depicted in dioramas. The omission of such essential facts is most likely rooted in the effort to avoid difficult topics, the tendency to retell history according to colonialist European American norms, and in the perceived inevitability of collateral damage to other cultures in the name of ‘progress’.

While these dioramas rarely related messages from the perspective of the native indigenous cultures being portrayed, this is now changing. It has only been in the last few decades that indigenous peoples have begun to build their own museums, and to tell their own histories from their own social, cultural, and native experiences and perspectives. The Ziiibiwing Center in Michigan is one example of a Native-American-designed and operated museum (see also Lonetree 2012). The Ziiibiwing Center differs in its presentation from the standard cultural, social, archaeological, anthropological stories told by most museums, that is, from the Western European American perspective. We address the Ziiibiwing Center in more detail later in this chapter.

8.4 Three Examples

In this next section, I discuss three examples and emphasize cultural contradiction, while also discussing the dominant perspective and what it means to take a perspective.

8.4.1 Example 1: African–Americans: *The Old Folks at Home*

As early as the turn of the nineteenth century, popular “museums” had proven the immense appeal of their wax models and painted illusions. (Brundage 2003, p. 1381)

Figure 8.1 shows a picture titled ‘Old Folks at Home’. One might assume from this rendering that slavery (The Peculiar Institution, Stamp 1956) and/or any false characterization of the African-American slave is part of a benign and paternalistic tradition, and one that is done for the slaves’ good. In fact, slavery was a toilsome and dehumanizing way of life, and one that African-American slaves actively resisted (Stamp 1956). The art piece in Fig. 8.1, a 4 × 5 in. color transparency, is housed in the State Archives of Florida in the folk-life section. There is no information on the exact time it was meant to represent.

This representation, even though not in a natural history museum, serves as an example of the portrayal of enslaved African Americans as contented citizens at peace with the world. It portrays neither the past or present reality, but it does reflect the way many white European-American landowners perceived (or wanted to perceive) the lives of their slaves (Kendi 2016).

The diorama in Fig. 8.2 (and others like it) was created around 1820 by Gerrit Schouten, a Dutch government clerk, and was designed to be sold as a souvenir to show the ‘bucolic’ life of dancing slaves (Byrne 2014).

Let’s compare the dioramas in Figs. 8.1 and 8.2 with the following use of dioramas, as described by Brundage (2003), who recounted Meta Warrick’s creation of the Tableaux of the African-American experience at the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition in 1907.



Fig. 8.1 Photograph of an African American diorama, Old Folks at Home, State Archives of Florida



Fig. 8.2 Diorama of a slave dance, Gerrit Schouten

Confronting visitors, who meandered through the Negro Building at the 1907 Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition, held in Norfolk, Virginia, was a tableau entitled *Landing of First Twenty Slaves at Jamestown*. Meta Warrick (Fuller), a sculptor, had created and arranged twenty-four two-foot-high plaster figures that re-imagined the shackled, nearly nude, and traumatized Africans who had landed in Jamestown in 1619. In *Landing* and thirteen other dioramas, she used more than 130 painted plaster figures, model landscapes, and backgrounds to give viewers a chronological survey of the African American experience. Scenes ranged from a tableau of a fugitive slave to a depiction of the home life of “the modern, successfully educated, and progressive Negro.” (Jackson and Davis 1908, p. 195).

Warrick’s dioramas were deliberately designed to give an accurate account of African-American life to the public, but especially to the African Americans who might see them. Warrick, who trained in Paris, was a ‘negro aristocrat’ from Philadelphia; she wanted to provide accurate information to other African Americans. As Brundage suggested, Warrick’s depictions showed the upward evolution of African Americans, from slavery to modern times, to “provide evidence of the modernity of African Americans to whites and blacks alike” (Brundage 2003, p. 1370).

As Brundage noted: “Whereas ‘Old South’ dioramas and such related anthropological exhibits organized by whites (such as Figs. 8.1 and 8.2) *exhibited* blacks, Warrick’s dioramas *represented* them” (p. 1373). The distinction between *exhibiting* and *representing* Blacks was not just about authorship, but also about identity, agency, defining cultural norms, and re-interpreting colonialist histories. Warrick took the opportunity “to destabilize the binary classifications of civilization and ‘the other,’ and of modernity and primitiveness” (2003, p. 1371).

Warrick’s alternative view went against the mainstream perspective and demanded that we look at African-American history openly and honestly. Unfortunately, these 1907 dioramas no longer physically exist; there are only written accounts by contemporaries. However, newer museums, such as the Museum of the African Diaspora, which showcases the art, history, and cultural richness that resulted from the migration of people of African descent, are designed to represent Blacks in historically accurate ways including the traumatization and ongoing suffering of the lived experience of slaves.

8.4.2 Example 2: South African Bushmen

As a general principle, culture wars are more likely to break out at times when there is a high degree of communal fragmentation and polarization, and widespread civic malaise and low communal morale. (Dubin 1992/2014, p. 38)

Not surprisingly, there are similar contradictions in the representation of the indigenous people of South Africa. Figure 8.3 is a museum depiction of South African Bushmen. These models were made in the 1900s by museum modeler James Drury, who, when it was thought that the Bushmen might be dying out,



Fig. 8.3 A young visitor studies a Bushmen exhibit, Gideon Mendel. Getty Image

made casts of living people (a long and painful process). Even though the people who were cast actually wore modern clothes in their daily lives, they were represented in the cast figures as almost naked and displayed in past contexts and styles of dress, in order to preserve them for posterity (Davison 1993, 2005). The sixty-eight body casts of Bushmen specimens were taken in a process that was both humiliating and painful for the participants. The title of Drury's book, *Bushman, whale and dinosaur*, detailing his 40-year affiliation with the South African Museum, gives some indication of the status these human specimens were granted in relation to animals.

Not surprisingly, these casts have been the source of great controversy and complex interactions between museums, the public, and the Bushmen, who are more accurately referred to as the San and Khoi indigenous groups. The casts were originally displayed with little contextualization or reference to the Bushmen's complex social and cultural networks, and the Bushmen were typically referred to in the past tense. In the late 1950s, the Bushmen models were re-situated into an 'invented cultural context,' with new labels and narratives that were based on an early nineteenth-century painting by Samuel Daniell. This newer narrative also emphasized probable extinction and lacked accurate historical contextualization (Coombes 2003).

As with the African Americans in the US, the sanctioned perspective is that of white European-American curators, anthropologists, modelers, and/or museum directors, in the service of *exhibiting* Bushmen rather than *representing* them.

Several subsequent shifts in the exhibition have occurred at this museum, now called the Iziko South African Museum. In 1989, a companion exhibition was

created to provide context and background of the people who had been cast in the exhibit (Dubin 2006). And in 1993, an exhibition called 'Out of Touch' used "dilemma labels" and superimposed images to "qualify previous notions of cultural stasis by acknowledging urbanization and other changes" (Rankin and Hamilton 1999).

To complicate matters further, two different museums were vying for the right to represent the Bushmen in the 1990s, each asking the question, 'who are the Bushmen?'

The South African Museum (SAM) and the South African National Gallery, situated across from each other ... [reflected a] debate regarding how the indigenous categories, 'Bushman' and 'Khoisan', can be publicly represented (From Jackson and Robbins 1999 in Dubin 2007).

Dubin discussed the role of the SAM further, stating:

Negative voices have intensified in recent years. SAM personnel responded by incorporating this dissent into the display itself: the museum posted text that summarized contemporary debates so that viewers could understand the variety of reactions that the diorama evoked. SAM supplemented this by displaying copies of news articles, information concerning the making of the casts, as well as providing a social history of the people who were depicted. Until 2001, this approach created the sense of a continuing discussion ... But then SAM shut down the diorama in April of that year... (Dubin 2006, p. 487)

Across the street, in 1996, the newer exhibit, *Miscast*, at the National Gallery art museum, reinterpreted the Bushmen as being fundamental to South African culture. *Miscast* was designed to counteract the disparaging treatment of The SAM. As Dubin suggests, *Miscast* also raised conflict:

Miscast was dynamic: it incorporated multiple perspectives, involved a variety of media and sensory experiences, and required the audience to interact with its various components... the [original] diorama disregarded the reprehensible treatment accorded the Bushmen by European settlers and their descendants – it was legal to hunt and kill them well into the twentieth century (see Gordon 1992) – *Miscast* interrogated that history. And, significantly, *Miscast* was presented in the National (Art) Gallery, ... thus troubling entrenched notions of where nature and culture "belong:" (p. 499)

The *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of Khoi and San History and Material Culture* exhibition was designed by someone of European descent and some of the elements were considered to be derogatory, "thus troubling entrenched notions of where nature and culture "belong." (Dubin 2006). Some Khoisan argued that the exhibition designer could not speak about or for their people and that there had been 'inadequate consultative protocols' developed with representatives (Dubin 2007, p. 488). In short, it failed to accurately represent them. Subsequent exhibitions have attempted to incorporate quotes from Bushmen individuals and installed a replica cave to "allow the viewer to experience something approximating what the Bushmen might have felt originally" in answer to the deficiencies of past Bushmen displays (Dubin 2006, p. 489).

The exhibits and the controversy they engendered have been written about extensively in museum literature by Drury, Dubin, and Coombs, who used it as a

basis for exploring how hegemony, power, and culture affect modern museums that attempt to deal with their country's colonial past and the objects they had collected and made.

The issue of perspective is critical. Whose perspective is being used and toward what end? Similar to the African American controversy described above, the Khoisan people were *exhibited* by others, rather than *represented* in their own voices. There was no Meta Warrick to accurately represent their history, culture, or spirituality.

8.4.3 Example 3: American Indians Behind Glass

We wanted to stay away from the whole idea of Indians behind glass... (Diep 2014)

By 'American Indians behind glass', Diep means American Indian mannequins and dioramas with a wall of glass separating them from museum visitors to keep people out and to protect the exhibits. The two quotes below tell very different stories of the diorama experience:

They force one to look closely, especially in miniature, imagine an entire village scene in 100 cubic inches." (Diep 2014, quoting Raymond Silverman, director of museum studies at the University of Michigan).

And the opposite view:

Dioramas only serve to confuse the public and enforce already present stereotypes... Dioramas can muddy the experience by placing a contemporary interpretation of a life that we do not have firsthand knowledge of. (Diep 2014)

Because such miniaturized dioramas depict a culture in a freeze-frame moment in time—often during the seventeenth century, when many tribes first came into contact with Europeans—the dioramas encourage viewers to think that all American Indians still live as depicted in the dioramas. They are static rather than dynamic, and don't to give a sense of depth, time or dimension. As one Native American expresses it:

We are living, breathing, contemporary human beings. Many of us felt it was wrong that we had been represented so long as little dolls in the context of a natural history museum. (Margaret Noori quote, in Diep 2014)

Complaints like these have resulted in the removal of some dioramas (Fig. 8.4) (Miller 2015). One of the more interesting cases occurred at the University of Michigan museum. Part of this conflict is excerpted below to convey the flavor of the interactions at the time (Capriccioso 2009).

They showed eight indigenous cultures of North America, of which six were from the Michigan area. Four of the Michigan tribes were represented as they would have looked at colonial contact, and two depicted more ancient times.

Museum officials said the dioramas have been popular throughout the years, especially with elementary school children and teachers who regularly visit the site for a field trip learning experience.

Tiya Miles, director of the Native American Studies Program at the university, first encountered the dioramas in 2006, a few years after she moved to Ann Arbor.

“Through the placement of the dioramas in the natural history museum setting, a de facto relationship seemed to be posed between animals, inanimate objects, and indigenous people.”

Her initial critical impression has only grown stronger as she's heard stories about the negative experiences of Native American children who view the dioramas in the company of non-Native children, such as on elementary school field trips.

“Small children who have no other means of learning about Native histories and cultural ways sometimes highlight details (such as a lack of full dress of the figures) that are anachronistic in our modern times, and tease Native children about them,” Miles said.

“This kind of exchange is detrimental to Native students' identities and all students' learning.”

Sometimes there was conflict over the size of the mannequins, actual size versus miniaturization but this is not the main concern. Diep (2014) argues that the problem is deeper than size. These disagreements arise because dioramas, in and of themselves, are not ‘the problem’. The real ‘problem’ is the culture that put American Indians in dioramas in the first place—in natural history museums...in these sometimes-beautiful, contained worlds meant to record what the assumed viewer's ancestors had wiped out (p. 47). This fundamental tension always exists for the viewer, whether it is appreciated or not.

An example of a countermeasure being taken to the *exhibition* of American Indians is their decision to *represent* themselves in their own museums and dioramas. Amy Lonetree (2012) has written of several new museums that are deeply influenced by American Indian peoples' spirituality, culture, and history, and that tell their stories differently. Several modern Indian museums, designed and maintained by tribes themselves, have grappled with how to more accurately represent their experiences in the form of dioramas. One of the most interesting exemplars, the Zippiwing Center in Michigan (Fig. 8.5), by the Anishinabe, “discussed dioramas extensively before they opened in 2004” (Diep 2014).



Fig. 8.4 Dioramas at the University of Michigan



Fig. 8.5 Diorama at the Ziiibwing Center in Michigan

The Ziibiwing decided to represent their culture as follows:

They settled instead on more open displays, populated with life-sized mannequins that can be updated as Anishinabe culture changes. The displays are spread along the sides of the main, curving pathway where visitors walk. They show pre-contact Anishinabe people and Anishinabe activities through the seasons. Photographs and artifacts show the colonization of Anishinabe land by white Americans, while modern Anishinabe-made artwork show the tribe's current culture. None of the mannequins are inside glass cases. "We wanted to stay away from the whole idea of Indians behind glass," says Martin, the center's director. (Diep 2014)

The Ziibiwing Center uses oral history as its center-piece, and relies on seven prophecies to underpin its master narrative. The central themes include:

1. Written in stone (wisdom in stone, petroglyphs)
2. Teaching lodge (spiritual, lifelong learning)
3. The laws/rules made by the government (U.S. policies)
4. When the promises were made (how a treaty may have looked)
5. Great illness and death (result of US government policies)
6. Blood memory (the inherent connection to spirituality, ancestors, and all of Creation);
7. Reburial of the Anishinabe of long ago (ancestors have the right to remain undisturbed in the earth)

The differences between the Ziibiwing Center and other museums arise from the desire of Ziibiwing museum staff to "put American Indian survival in a colonial context, directly challenging the classic western narrative of American Indian disappearance after westward expansion" (Lonetree 2009, p. 137). The Ziibiwing Center presents uncomfortable issues such as "diseases, killing, land theft, poverty, violence, and forced conversion by Christian missionaries" (p. 134). They actively promote the native Anishinabe language and raise awareness of the days of boarding school "traumas," especially the experience of American Indian children being forced from their homes, forced to speak only English, and forced to adopt Western ways" (p. 145).

The Ziibiwing Center *represents* American Indians from the Native perspective rather than *exhibiting* them from the European-American perspective.

8.5 Discussion

With the end of colonialism, the rise of new nationalisms, the official recognition of and respect for ethnic diversities, and increased local pride in local art, traditions, and knowledge production, the "culture" of museums has had to change. Ironically, it has been the culture of the colonial, not of the indigenous people to pass away. (Thomas 1993, in Macleod 1998)

Competing points of view—that dioramas are a place of wonder and imagination vs. dioramas are a place of shame and dishonesty—make visible the significant cultural conflicts that rock our modern world.

Disagreement about the way indigenous peoples are represented is not new (Dubin 2007), and these disagreements concern not only indigenous or enslaved peoples. The three cultural conflict examples used here stem from dioramas or depictions that have already been contested, modified, and/or removed. These examples are taken from different peoples of various cultures, languages, and social systems, but who share the experience of having their cultural realities misrepresented.

We now understand that displaying American Indian cultures alongside dinosaur fossils, gemstones, and taxidermied animals portrays American Indians as less than fully human. Living South African Bushmen were cast in plaster, placed in incorrect contexts, and also treated as less than human. African Americans were frozen in time, reifying a fantasy vision of the enslaved rather than free modern people. And, because each was depicted in freeze-frame moments in time—often around the time of first contact with Europeans—each culture was historicized in incorrect ways. Often the story itself was antiquated, highly biased towards Western European cultural norms, and inaccurate. The identity, power, and agency of the subverted cultures were at stake. Times are changing.

Museums still reflect the colonialist perspectives in many ways, but they are reconsidering, revising, and ‘reculturing’ (Ash [in preparation](#)) their approaches. The closing of the Bushmen exhibits in South Africa, and the removal of the Native American representational exhibits in Michigan are good examples of how “curators and scholars are obliged to recognize that the museum ‘is no longer, if ever it was, innocently engaged in the processes of collection, conservation, classification and display of objects’” (Silverstone in Macleod 1998, p. 308).

In the past, most museum exhibition narratives of the histories of Native Americans, African Americans, and South African Bushmen were controlled by museum curators and collectors, and interpreted by museum docents. These exhibitions and interpretations reflected the perspective of the collectors and the ethos of past centuries. Early collectors engaged in officially sanctioned collection parties, often without regard to the indigenous people’s spiritual, cultural or personal values, in order, instead, to burnish the image of the museum, its benefactors, and its Board of Directors. This hundred-years old emphasis on collection still permeates museum culture; the valuable materials collected in past centuries continue to be interpreted from the Western-European perspective; and in many cases the colonial perspective remains essentially unchanged.

There have been counter perspectives and counter exhibits—the Warrick dioramas of 1906 (see Brundage 2003), the Ziibiwing Center in Michigan (see Lonetree and Cobb 2008), and even the *Miscast exhibit* in South Africa in 1996 (see Dubin 2006)—all of which have attempted to re-write the master narrative and refute the dominant colonialist perspective that has framed most museum dioramas depicting indigenous peoples.

8.5.1 *The Fundamental Role of Cultural Conflict*

Are dioramas objects of beauty to be admired, imagined, and dreamed? Are they crass cover-ups of some of the worst moments in history? Are they both? We have seen in the three examples how much social, cultural and historical perspective matters. Do we view indigenous cultures from a colonialist, heroic point of view, filled with self-satisfied European superiority, or from a post-colonialist viewpoint that emphasizes the enforced social, psychological, and cultural enslavement of indigenous peoples by our ancestor colonizers? This stark contrast is mirrored in the cultural conflict surrounding how to interpret dioramas.

The answer depends on the perspective of those doing the interpretation. One person may see an American Indian display as the 'spoils of war' while another may understand it as the portrayal of the 'real' culture. Who is correct?

Dubin has argued that dioramas can be positioned as sites of persuasion, and suggests, for example, that:

Conflict and negotiation habitually occur at sites of persuasion such as museums, manifest in revival, or reawakening dormant beliefs and values; in reaffirmation, asserting the importance of particular principles and standards; in recommitment, directing energies toward communal goals; in reclamation, asserting ownership over objects or knowledge that has been forbidden or denied; in repatriation, procuring what was seized by outsiders in the past; in recuperation, reinscribing personal narratives that have been suppressed or erased; in resanctification, restoring what has been profaned; and in reconciliation, developing new relationships between the past, the present, and alternative visions of the future. (Dubin 2006, p. 478)

This very broad statement applies, at least in part, to the examples we have discussed in this chapter. Let's consider the places in which personal narratives can be 'reinscribed'.

One of the fundamental tensions we face in interpreting dioramas is the inescapable truth that most collectors attempted to rapidly gather together and save material goods, while often the national government tried to destroy the people who produced them. The American government, for example, strove to minimize, denigrate, and erase American Indian social, spiritual and material cultures, while museums were collecting and preserving behind glass the physical items associated with these cultures. We see this situation in the following quote: "the 1893 Columbian World Expo in Chicago included an American Indian village display to show visitors an "almost extinct civilization, if civilization it is to be called" (Diep 2014). The phrase "if civilization it is to be called" was the dominant attitude in the 1800s.

The same is true of the South African Bushmen exhibition, who were considered to be sub-human. The Khoisan were displayed as casts because it was anticipated that they would soon be extinct. At that time, it was still legal to hunt and kill South African Bushmen; and, there was little to no regard for their social, spiritual or material cultures. Despite their not becoming extinct, the casts, models, and artifacts endured as museum exhibits, as originally intended. While times had changed, the dioramas did not. Subsequent adaptations and new exhibits have demonstrated only incremental shifts in perspective.

African American slaves too, were frozen in time, reifying a vision of enslaved beings who were happy, yet less than human, rather than as a free modern people. The story most often told was antiquated, highly biased towards Western European cultural norms, and wildly inaccurate.

The identity, power, and agency of these subverted cultures were viewed as the property of the collectors, owner, or beholder rather than of the represented peoples. And as Warrick and Brundage noted earlier, marginalized people such as slaves were not allowed to *represent* themselves instead they were *exhibited* by others.

Gurian (2006), Jackson and Robbins (1999), Dubin (1992/2014, 2006, 2007), Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 1994), Macdonald (2006), Dawson (2014), myself (Ash [in preparation](#)) and many others have written about power and hegemony in museums. This is not a comfortable or easy topic to address.

We currently are participating in an ongoing international dialogue, which reflects the transitional times in which we live. As indigenous peoples increasingly represent themselves, as post-colonialist perspectives take hold, and as hard truths are told, we can hope that an accurate reflection and explication of the conflicts will help museums and indigenous peoples to (as Dubin suggested) reinterpret, recuperate, repatriate, reclaim, reaffirm, recommit, and resanctify, while we direct our energies toward communal goals and reinscribing new meaning to old, and very tired, perspectives.

8.6 Conclusion

We are caught in an interesting moment in history. A decade from now we will probably look back at this transitional time and notice the shifts in how we recognize and handle cultural remains, how we review the rights of indigenous peoples, how we ended the activity of collection in general, and how we understand the changing roles and functions of natural history museums.

Dioramas are still important but perhaps not in the same way they were in the 1800s. They are still important in terms of species conservation, habitat protection and enhancing views of biological diversity among other important topics. They will continue to be places of imagination and wondering.

In this chapter I have argued that natural history museums can do a better job in separating out cultural remains from strictly natural history concerns. By examining various views of the intermixing of dinosaurs and indigenous peoples, we see how such indiscriminate mixing longer works. Worldviews have change drastically since the early days of natural history museums and most museums are working hard to catch up with those shifts. We have seen this reflected in the repurposing refurbishing and dismantling of dioramas. Such actions are necessary, but insufficient, to create the kind of changes we envision for the dioramas of the future, that is, any diorama containing so-called 'primitive' humans and their material artifacts. We know it is essential to have *representation* from the parties most closely involved. And, as we have seen from the various commentaries on even the National Museum

of the American Indian, in a book edited by Lonetree and Cobb (2008), even when such Native representation occurs, exhibit design is challenging. The Ziibiwing Center is one model for how things might be done differently.

The newer vision the Ziibiwing represents is not necessarily in the particular material artifacts represented, the difference instead, resides in the unique worldview and way of being Native Americans offer. When this unique worldview drives all decision-making, an entirely different experience is available to the viewer.

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