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Introduction: Representing Native America

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In the introduction to her book *Imagination in Theory: Culture, Writing, Words, and Things*, cultural studies theorist Michèle Barrett writes, "The text cannot put its feelings into words and work on them; it sits there as an object on which we rehearse our interpretations."[1] Though she is referencing the written word in this instance, the same can be said about culture and how we rehearse our interpretations on it. This special issue is grappling with that very notion: how we interpret and ultimately represent American Indian culture through display and analysis of its artworks and material productions.

Rooted in the field of anthropology, the practices associated with exhibition culture have taken on new meaning in several academic disciplines, including culture and ethnic studies, fine arts, history, American studies, and art history, each with a unique perspective and scholarly agenda. Authors such as James Clifford in his book *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, and Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner in their edited volume *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* have made important contributions to the study of cultural objects and examination of the representation process. More recently, postcolonial and postmodern theories have deconstructed once-commonplace Eurocentric assumptions about primitivism in relation to Native art and culture. Currently, some of the most interesting debates about the representation of American Indian culture and display of Native objects are being waged in the interdisciplinary field of museum studies. In the text *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, editors Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto illustrate the complexity and scope of scholarly debates surrounding the issue of representation in a multitude of forums, the written word and public spaces being only two.

Thus, academics have begun to expand on prior approaches to writing culture by shedding light on how cultural production is multilayered and mediated; and in the case of Native America, how it is also affected by insider/outsider dynamics, community memories, imposed ideals of culture, and heterogeneous identities. Some of the contributors to this special issue focus on historical and contemporary museum exhibition practices. Other authors included here examine representations taking place in other arenas,

illustrating how data has often been lost, forgotten, or intentionally left out of the discourse. Several articles address the complicated and often convoluted relationships among object, creator, culture, and representative. Combined, all of the articles provide a wide spectrum of responses to the display practices of representing culture, as well as a platform from which further discussions can be generated.

Nancy Parezo writes about the power of representation in the staging of a unique and highly successful series of fashion shows held in 1942. These showcases, presented more than 120 times between 1942 and 1956, aided in the appreciation of American Indian clothing and dress as a messenger of style, purpose, and identity, all components of a living culture that, when representing American Indians, had not really been considered before. Though a unique approach to educating the public, the curator, Frederic H. Douglas of the Denver Art Museum, unintentionally highlighted cultural differences in stereotypic ways. The author also explores the important role these "live exhibits" played in the development of Native fashion shows and in the fashion design program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In his contribution, Bruce Bernstein addresses the burden of non-Native expectation on Native artists, highlighting issues of authenticity, creation, and public display. Bernstein writes about the booth sitters hired by collectors to sit—sometimes all night—and wait for the official opening of the annual Indian Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He focuses attention on the desire of consumers who wish to find "genuine" objects without recognizing the problematics of their wanting and the subsequent affect it has on the artists and market; in the process Bernstein points out how closely linked production and representation are, though this relationship is difficult to address publicly because of its complexity.

Kathy Freise traces the chronology of the city of Albuquerque's Cuarto-centenario Memorial. This particular memorial drew great criticism because of the complicated historical relationship among Hispanics, American Indians, and Euro-Americans in that region. Because of the long-term role the memorial would play as interpreter of past events, members of the Hispanic and Indian communities, in particular, wanted their version of the story to be well represented, but few would have imagined the firestorm of controversy created by those who suggested its creation. Freise focuses on this excellent example of the role that public art plays in the telling of the past to highlight the ways in which memorials both enhance and impede the understanding of contemporary life. Gerard van Bussel also addresses historical representational strategies in his "inside" look at how Native culture and people were viewed from the perspective of Europeans. He presents an interesting study of a series of late-nineteenth-century sculptures at the Natural History Museum in Vienna that represents Indians from throughout the Americas. This holistic presentation explores how Europeans exoticized the New World and analyzes the categorization of indigenous people. Faced by a global audience who today may find these sculptures terribly stereotypical or antiquarian, they are a stellar illustration of how ideas of culture(s) and the representation of it evolve into more realistic perspectives.

Lea McChesney interrogates the role that artwriting plays in the construction of American Indian culture vis-à-vis what is written about the objects produced by community members, in this case, the Hopi. She argues that the power of this discourse can make a significant difference in the success or failure of an artist, determine art market values, and influence the commodification of objects. McChesney does this by analyzing twenty years of *American Indian Art Magazine* and other published materials. My contribution to the collection outlines the ways in which artwriting and, to borrow McChesney's syntax, *culturewriting*, have influenced the way American Indian objects are labeled, how that labeling moves into common usage, and how it is then adapted by Natives and non-Natives alike to describe and define them. Providing a chart that organized my own tally of how Indian objects are typically written about, I illustrate how this labeling often hinders a fuller comprehension of Native American culture because the terminology lacks consistency or falls short in explanation.

Rachel Griffin writes about one exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian and the institution's success and/or lack of success in transmitting what tribal members felt was significant about the objects presented while providing what visitors may have expected to encounter. She offers insight into the complex tasks that curators face but few people outside the museum profession are even aware of. As Griffin calls for a more complete investigation of the trajectory of cultural art objects from community to museum exhibit, Scott Manning Stevens maps the complex history of objects collected on the Lewis and Clark expedition. His article follows the objects from the Peale Museum where they were first exhibited to their final destination, the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Stevens sheds light on how the manipulation and exhibition of one collection can encompass many meanings and be equally valuable, for different reasons, to Natives and non-Natives alike, most interestingly when representing two histories usually understood as parallel rather than interwoven.

In short, *The Representation of American Indian Culture as Artifact or Artwork* offers insights into the act of representing and how it subsequently reflects, distorts, shapes, and invokes a map of American Indian identity. It provides readers with diverse viewpoints regarding our national histories and encourages dialogue about the intersection of cultural and intellectual histories. This special issue is designed to raise awareness about the challenges faced by curators, educators, artists, and others deemed responsible for representing Native culture to the public. In making these efforts we will ensure that, together with objects and peoples studied from the past, those living today are represented with dignity and an appreciation for change.

NOTE

1. Barrett, Michèle. *Imagination in Theory: Culture, Writing, Words, and Things* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 7.