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Memory, Monument, and the Museum

**The Culturally-Specific Museum
and its Place in American Consciousness**

by Molly Sullivan

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degree of Master of Arts in Museum Professions
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Abstract

This thesis explores the increasingly common phenomenon of museums created to honor particular cultural groups. While the American culturally-specific museum may trace its roots to the time-honored tradition of memorializing Native American tribes in local historical societies, the modern incarnation focuses on the inclusion of cultural representatives in the planning and orchestration of exhibitions in order to insure institutional integrity. In some cases, heightened sensitivity towards the “rightness” of the individuals representing the culture in question may discourage interested parties from different backgrounds from participating in a culturally-specific museum project. Thus, a family of museums created under the auspices of diversifying the American museum community are at times criticized for presenting only one side of an historical story—albeit a side that has typically been left out of other museum narratives.

The author examines the development of the culturally-specific museum movement in the United States by analyzing the creation and functions of three very different institutions in Washington, D.C. The evaluation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers a glimpse into the many challenges faced by an institution seeking to memorialize unspeakable tragedy; an analysis of the National Museum of the American Indian provides insight into the messages transmitted through architectural and curatorial choices; a description of the plans for the National Museum of African American History and Culture explores the complex political and social questions surrounding the creation of a proposed addition to the Smithsonian Institution system of museums.

All three institutions share the common challenge of representing history through the eyes of a specific cultural group. Likewise, each museum can be lauded or criticized for its efforts to claim historical events as the property of a particular segment of the population. The public's ever-shifting opinions of individual culturally-specific museums illustrate current societal attitudes toward historical events, cultural differences, and the politics of public commemoration.

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The Culturally-Specific Museum
and its Place in American Consciousness

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I. Staking a Claim to Cultural Memory

On Tuesday, May 10, 2005, German television reporter and well-known activist Lea Rosh stood before a crowd of commemorators at the opening ceremonies for the Berlin Holocaust Memorial and Museum. She spoke of her work over the past seventeen years—her earnest desire to create a German Holocaust memorial, the problems and conflicts that dogged its construction, and the object that inspired her efforts: a human tooth. Rosh then brandished the molar to the crowd, explaining that she has carried the tooth with her since discovering it seventeen years ago at Belzec death camp, and that the tooth would soon be placed within one of the 2,711 stone pillars that make up the new memorial.

In the days following this announcement, critics from all over the world have voiced concern over the tiny object that is now causing tremendous controversy. Rosh's detractors argue that after so many years of activism, Rosh is attempting to claim the public memorial as her own. German officials and leaders of Berlin's Jewish community are united in their confusion on the subject. Neither group wishes to downplay Rosh's considerable efforts toward the construction of a Holocaust memorial, yet politicians and prominent Jewish leaders alike are shocked at Rosh's intention to incorporate human remains into the completed memorial.

Rosh's proposal is not helped by the fact that it came as a surprise to many people involved in the planning of the memorial, and a complete shock to the public. Disgusted Berlin Jewish Community chairman Albert Meyer stated that "when she held up the tooth, I thought I might vomit. Had she actually been carrying a piece of a dead Jew in her

pocket for 17 years?”¹ Rosh defends her decision by arguing that Jewish law only requires that entire bodies or large body parts be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

Nonetheless, the proposed symbolic burial of the tooth at the memorial has elicited outrage from Berlin’s rabbinical and lay communities.

Lea Rosh is no stranger to criticism. Christened Edith, Ms. Rosh adopted the name Lea at age eighteen in reference to her interest in Jewish heritage. Her paternal grandfather was the only Jew in an otherwise Protestant family; Rosh herself was baptized as a Protestant. Does Rosh’s background affect public perception of her activism? It would seem so. Lea Rosh has served as Berlin’s champion of the Jewish cause for nearly two decades, praised by many for her commitment to the construction of a memorial and dismissed by others as a fraudulent “professional Jew.”

This latest controversial addition to the new Holocaust memorial was reportedly approved by architect Peter Eisenman, despite the fact that Rosh and Eisenman seem to have fundamentally different views of the memorial. For example, Rosh refers to the Holocaust memorial as a grave for those who have no other. Eisenman deliberately omitted names, plaques, and markings from the field of massive stone slabs to avoid comparisons to gravestones. The tooth controversy is by no means the first stumbling block in the creation of the Berlin memorial: it was lately discovered that the maker of the anti-graffiti spray with which the stones are treated reportedly manufactured the Zyklon-B gas that the Nazis used to send millions of people to their graves. The discovery of this information nearly halted the project.

¹ Matthew Schofield, “Criticism Erupts Over Tooth Shown At Holocaust Memorial Ceremony,” [Knight Ridder Newspapers](#). 12 May 2005.

The current debate in Berlin raises many questions surrounding public memorials to tragedy and the ownership of cultural history. While Rosh insists that numerous rabbis have approved her proposal to imbed the mysterious tooth in a column, an equal (if not greater) number of Jewish clergy members argue that this violates the Jewish cultural practice of burying human remains in Jewish cemeteries. Likewise, the anonymity of the tooth is troubling to many. The tooth was found on the ground at Belzec—yet Rosh could unknowingly imbed the molar of an unknown Nazi soldier in a memorial to the suffering of Holocaust victims. In a memorial constructed in the historical epicenter of Nazism, such a mistake would be a devastating insult to the memory of the millions of people that died during the Holocaust. Even if the tooth could be linked to a victim, the question of appropriateness would linger. How much suffering should a memorial to great tragedy actually communicate? Although the tooth would not be visible beneath the surface of the stone slab, its existence has already been highly publicized. Is the tooth of a murdered Jew a tragic symbol of humankind's suffering at its own hands, or a woman's misguided attempt to add a gruesome personal token to a site of national mourning and remembrance? Apparently Lea Rosh's involvement with the campaign for a Holocaust memorial has become so personal a quest that she feels the need to contribute the fragment of a human being that she has carried in her pocket for seventeen years—not in reference to his suffering, but in recognition of her own efforts. The problem lies not only with the tooth, but with the non-Jewish woman that has proposed its "burial."

II. Conceptualizing the Culturally-Specific Museum

The future of the much-disputed tooth remains unsettled at this time. As a contemporary subject, the controversy associated with the Berlin Holocaust Memorial offers an excellent framework for a discussion of the issues surrounding America's relatively new interest in the commemoration of culture through memorials and museums. This paper seeks to address the construction of institutions that double as memorial and museum by combining architecture, content, and interpretive strategies in order to pay homage to a specific cultural group. Frequently, such institutions address widely recognized or lesser-known tragedies. By analyzing the planning and execution of permanent exhibitions at several American institutions, this essay will explore the concept of the culturally-specific museum as it assumes its place in American society and collective memory.

Throughout this paper, the term culturally-specific museum will be used to describe a permanent institution that uses objects and architecture to recognize the achievements and unique life ways of a specific segment of society. Culturally-specific museums are based on the description of events and activities that are salient to the creation of cultural identity. Thus, such a museum may also serve as a memorial to the great tragedies that have shaped a culture. A culturally-specific memorial museum may seek to expand the traditional definition of the memorial by combining an interior exhibition space with an exterior architectural statement. Involvement of representatives from the chosen group is essential to the creation of a museum that accurately portrays the culture in question. A museum created solely by cultural outsiders may appear to fit under the heading of culturally-specific, yet ultimately fails to include the authentic voice required to give such a museum credibility.

III. Museums and the Transmission of Memory

An unspoken tenet of nearly every culturally-specific museum is the transmission of memory. How is this accomplished? Memory lies on a spectrum: at one end, we find personal, individualized memories; at the other, collective experiences that have become a part of cultural identity. A museum may address one segment of the memory spectrum. For example, the birthplace of an American president may celebrate the life of an individual through personal artifacts. Conversely, a museum of Japanese culture will address a larger population through the use of generalized objects. Culturally-specific museums often choose to integrate these two approaches by telling a societal story through objects with known connections to individuals involved in the narrative.

Written and oral histories form an essential part of the transmission of both individual and collective memory. In the community of culturally-specific museums, written and oral testimonies are not interchangeable; hence the fairly recent explosion of interest in the preservation of the spoken word. Personal statements from eyewitnesses lend a sense of authenticity to historical events. This is not only evident in the museum, but also in the home—what child has not asked an older relative to tell and retell stories from his or her childhood? The transmission of oral history within a museum through video, sound recording, or personal encounter allows the visitor to create an individualized link to otherwise distant ideas and events. Colleges and universities as a community institution play an important role in archiving collections of video and audio commentary on historical events. For instance, Yale University's Fortunoff Archive is

internationally recognized for its efforts to collect and preserve video testimony from Holocaust survivors.

This is in direct juxtaposition to the classic western tradition of transmitting educational information through the written word. Oral history is seen as a less reliable source, as a story may change over time. Written memory remains the same whether it is read the day of the event in question, or many years later. Proponents of the transmission of memory through speech argue that “the elevation of the written over the spoken has overridden memory, rendered it suspect, literally the stuff of hearsay. With it has come the ignoring of those who seek to remember, and therefore the loss of alternative views of ourselves and the human condition.”² According to Foucault, text eventually became privileged over the spoken word as a result of its solidity: whereas the human voice delivers scattered words immediately lost in time, writing presents words as a tangible object of knowledge.³ Similarly, reading and writing were once the domain of the educated. The exclusivity of the written word increased both its perceived value and its believability. Our hunger for authentic history is contradicted by our hesitancy to believe any account that is not the “official” version.

Museums occupy a unique place in the spoken-versus-written word debate. Were we to hear a story from a relative or neighbor, we may hesitate to take it at face value. Were we to hear the same story told through objects and spoken word in a museum, we would surely grant it more credibility. Cultural museums occupy the grey area between personal experience and collective history. The less informed visitor views a museum

² Gaynor Kavanagh, Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum. (London: Leicester University Press, 2000) 44.

³ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. (New York: Random House, 1970) 300.

narrative as absolute, while the savvier museum-goer detects that the story on display has been researched and approved by unseen experts.

IV. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The cold steel elevator doors open upon an enormous color photograph. At first the slightly grainy image is somewhat mysterious in the dimly lit room. Within moments the lines and shadows of the picture plane solidify into an image that our eyes would rather not behold. A group of men survey a large pile of wood and rubble. Uniforms identify the men as American soldiers. Emaciated human bodies are visible among the burnt wreckage—the charred skulls and bones of a makeshift crematorium. The year is 1945. The scene is Ohrdruf concentration camp. We have entered the first exhibition hall at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C..

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is arguably the best-known culturally specific museum in America—that is, the most widely recognized institution dedicated to the exploration and commemoration of events befalling a particular cultural group. A major destination for tourists of all cultural persuasions, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has garnered substantial praise and criticism since opening its doors to the public in 1993. Relatively few Americans realize that the creation of this museum, as well as its placement on the Washington Mall, is the result of the collision of complex social and political forces. The clarity of arguments for and against the museum, as well as extensive documentation of the museum planning process, allow the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to serve as an example of the challenges that accompany the creation of a large-scale culturally-specific museum. The following

description and analysis of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum will illustrate the issues faced by cultural museums in America, such as finding the balance between memorializing tragedy and celebrating cultural strength; assessing the appropriateness of controversial themes and objects; and creating a visitor environment that appeals to a diverse audience including, but certainly not limited to, the represented cultural group.

i. Creating a Monument to Memory

Like most large museums, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was many years in the making. On May 1, 1978, President Jimmy Carter publicly announced his plan to create the President's Commission on the Holocaust. The brainchild of Senator Wendell Anderson (D-MN), this committee would solicit designs for a competition to create a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, including non-Jews. This announcement showed the movement of the Holocaust from its status as an exclusively "Jewish" issue to its establishment in American national consciousness. Carter's endorsement of the proposed commission was the extension of a proverbial olive branch to the American Jewish community. Having made pro-Palestinian comments in the recent past, Carter was at risk of alienating American Jewry—a traditionally Democratic constituency. Carter's decision to create a national Holocaust memorial was a bold move towards reconciliation with American Jews; were his commission to fail to deliver an appropriate memorial, Carter could lose Jewish voters for good.

Six months after the announcement of his intentions, the President issued Executive Order 12093, thus officially establishing a commission to research sites, funding, and the overall viability of a national Holocaust memorial. Suggestions would

be reviewed by the President and Secretary of the Department of the Interior. As the creation of a memorial was seen as a lengthy project, the Commission was also given the more immediate task of investigating appropriate ways to commemorate April 28 and 29, 1979 as National Days of Remembrance for Victims of the Holocaust. All appointments to the Commission were subject to President Carter's approval. The Commission roster changed constantly for several months before final induction: a balance between religion, politics, and secularity was seen as necessary for success. Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel was handpicked to head the project, given his prominence in the fields of Holocaust literature and research. While Wiesel fervently agreed with the creation of a memorial and the Days of Remembrance, his acceptance of the position was contingent on the memorial's inherently educational nature (as opposed to a static monument). He also requested that all Commissioners, regardless of their survivor status, travel to Holocaust sites in Europe to gather information through firsthand experience. Wiesel and thirty-three other Commission members were sworn in on February 1, 1979; the Commission held its first meeting two weeks later.

From the beginning, Commission members "envisioned a 'living memorial' that would soon be seen as a facility housing memorial, museum, archive, and educational institute."⁴ The Commission recognized the challenge of countering American perception of the Holocaust as a Jewish event while increasing its relevance to American society. In reality, the Holocaust was largely integrated into American culture after its occurrence. Aside from Israel, the United States was the most common destination for Holocaust survivors. Although the Holocaust occurred in Europe, the need for American

⁴ Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 24.

remembrance increased with the arrival of each refugee and survivor following the conclusion of the Second World War. Additionally, many United States soldiers experienced the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand, and brought vivid memories of their experiences back to the States. The status of the Holocaust as a so-called imported tragedy imbued the project with a unique intensity: in addition to educating Americans and refuting claims that the Holocaust did not happen, the memorial must serve as a pilgrimage site for those unable to travel to actual Holocaust locations.

After eight months of travel, research, and discussion, the Commission on the Holocaust issued its final report to President Carter in September of 1979. While recognizing the importance of non-Jewish victims, the Commission insisted that the memorial be Jewish in focus with references to the universality of the Holocaust. The Commission and the President were already facing substantial criticism from several cultural groups for the exclusion from the Commission of Catholic Poles, Ukrainians, and representatives of other victimized groups. Carter was insistent on the inclusion of non-Jews in any national Holocaust memorial. When the President made a public statement acknowledging the extermination of at least five million non-Jews as a salient characteristic of the Holocaust, a rift developed between the Commission and the White House.

In the meantime, the Commission was experiencing internal struggles of its own. Wiesel and other Commission members, particularly survivors, were vehemently opposed to the inclusion of representatives from other victim groups in the planning of the museum, citing possible conflicts of interest. Numerous political bodies actively collaborated with the Nazi agenda to exterminate European Jewry, even while their own

non-Jewish constituents were victimized. Would a Polish Catholic Commissioner insist that the museum focus on ethnic Poles, much like the museum created at Auschwitz? Would a Ukrainian representative seek to suppress the long history of Ukrainian anti-Semitism? Other Commission members were open to representation in proportion to victimization—an idea which sparked a morbid competition to prove that one people had suffered greater atrocities than the next. Jewish survivors frequently argue that, although other groups were targeted by the Nazis, no other culture was earmarked for complete annihilation.⁵ Non-Jewish Holocaust victims represent a range of countries and cultures, yet no group can match the sheer volume of Jewish casualties. The accepted statistics have prompted Jews—and many Holocaust scholars—to approach the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish event.⁶

Nearing the brink of failure, the Commission was reestablished as the United States Holocaust Memorial Council one year after its initial formation. The new organization was comprised of fifty individuals appointed by the President, including two African Americans, two Poles, one Slav, and one Ukrainian. Ten Congress members served as political liaisons.⁷ More than half of the Council had been involved in the original Commission as members or advisors; one-third of all Council members identified themselves as Jewish.⁸ At this time, the project made an official transition from memorial to museum. According to the language of Congressional legislation, the new

⁵ In fact, the Nazis planned to exterminate the Gypsies in addition to the Jews.

⁶ Of the estimated 12 million people murdered by the Nazis, 6 million were Jewish; 1.5 million victims were Jewish children under the age of 15.

⁷ At present, the museum is governed by a board of sixty-eight members, fifty-five of whom are appointed by the President; five members each from the Senate and the House; and one member each from the Departments of Education, State, and Interior, respectively.

⁸ Linenthal 46

Council would “plan, construct, and observe the operation of a permanent living memorial museum to the Holocaust.”⁹

The semantics of this bill are worthy of investigation. Regardless of subject matter, memorials are most often superficial in nature. The term superficial is not used pejoratively, but rather in an attempt to illustrate the tendency of the memorial structure to communicate memory through the exterior. Even the most effective memorials do not revolve around a carefully orchestrated interior space filled with relevant objects; this characteristic is essential to the museum. As a museum, the imagined Holocaust memorial would transcend the limits of a physical structure intended to evoke remembrance. The museum would house objects and photographs arranged according to curatorial choice. The interpretive aspect of the collection—consciously using artifacts to tell a particular story—would distinguish the Washington, D.C. Holocaust memorial as an educational endeavor that was both memorial and museum.

ii. The Controversy of Inclusion

As the planning body of a national memorial established by the United States government, the Council was subject to political influence and presidential opinion. President Carter’s concern for the inclusion of non-Jewish victims in a national Holocaust memorial was likely linked to a fear of international relations damaged by exclusion. Unfortunately, “the administration’s resolve concerning a broad-based council working under an inclusive definition of the Holocaust was matched by Wiesel’s fear that this was a step

⁹ Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995) 20.

toward the eventual effacement of Jewish victims.”¹⁰ For many, Wiesel’s status as a Holocaust survivor—and a very prominent one at that—reinforced the legitimacy of his claim. As mentioned earlier, statistics increase the appeal of a “Jewish only” memorial to the Holocaust. Furthermore, certain Nazi measures such as ghettoization, forced labor, and death by gassing are remembered as actions taken specifically against the Jewish people. In actuality, Roma and Sinti Gypsies were sent to live in several ghettos; Catholic Poles comprised a large part of the labor camp population; and the first victims of Zyklon-B gas were mentally and physically handicapped German children. Wiesel and his supporters were understandably hesitant to memorialize other victimized groups that did nothing to help their Jewish neighbors. For example, memorializing Catholic Poles alongside Poland’s Jewish population would create a peer relationship between 3.3 million Jews and the population of a country that arguably allowed its Jewish citizens to be targeted by the Nazis. The destruction of the Polish people was secondary to the annihilation of the nation’s Jews. In Wiesel’s eyes, the inclusion of non-Jewish victims would gloss over a grim reality: several groups eventually targeted by the Nazis began as sympathizers to the party’s anti-Semitic cause. However, presenting the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish event further isolates Jewish culture from mainstream society, effectively endorsing the “otherness” suggested by anti-Semites throughout history. Likewise, an American museum that fails to address the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust reduces its own ability to interact with and educate a diverse audience about universal themes of humanity, prejudice, and hope.

The physical location of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum caused significant conflict within the Council and various cultural communities. Certain Council

¹⁰ Linenthal 52

members took it for granted that a national memorial to the Holocaust would be located in Washington, D.C. Others argued that New York City was the center of American Jewish culture and had, after Israel, the highest concentration of Holocaust survivors in the world. Prominent Holocaust historian Lucy Dawidowicz spoke in favor of the community function that such a museum would serve in the “capital” of American Jewry, as opposed to the more strictly memorial function of a Washington, D.C. location. Several Councilors made a convincing argument in favor of a D.C. museum, stating that a museum designed to educate Americans about the Holocaust must occupy a place in the symbolic center of American culture. While New York was a logical place for a Holocaust memorial (and would house one within a few years¹¹), “a museum built in New York, even if national in intent, would clearly be perceived as a Jewish Museum built in the heart of the Jewish community in America. Memory of the Holocaust would remain the province of American Jews. A national museum in Washington, on the other hand, made a more expansive—and controversial—claim on memory.”¹²

Locating a suitable site within the nation’s capital proved challenging. The Council was eager to consider existing structures, but willing to construct a building appropriate to its contents. Serious consideration was given to the vacant Sumner School for Black Students, an 1872 structure near the National Geographic Building. This site held the Council’s interest well into 1981, but was ultimately abandoned when Washington’s African American community expressed an interest in rehabilitating the building as an historic site. The Auditor’s Complex near the Bureau of Engraving and Printing garnered substantial attention. Located adjacent to the Washington Mall, the

¹¹ The Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust opened to the public in 1997.

¹² Linenthal 59

Complex consisted of a main building and three unused annexes, the stark lines and brick facades of which bore an unnerving resemblance to concentration camp barracks. The Council, Wiesel included, declared the Complex an ideal site. Title to the government-owned Annexes 1 and 2 was transferred to the Council in August of 1981. This transaction would draw harsh criticism in coming years for its somewhat covert nature: National Capital Planning Commission discussions were held privately rather than publicly, there was a conspicuous lack of public hearings on land transfer, and the transaction was not made public until two years after its completion. Supposed pressure from politically well-situated Council members was rumored to have influenced speedy and secretive negotiations for such a high-profile piece of real estate. Such rumors beg the question, was the Council so concerned about public outcry at the thought of a Holocaust museum near the Washington Mall that it felt the need to conduct its business dealings in secret?

Perhaps the Council's concerns regarding public reaction were well founded. From the announcement of the Museum's intended location, the Council was bombarded with objections. Some American Jews feared renewed anti-Semitism from those who perceived that Jews were pushing their way onto hallowed American ground. Other Jews objected to the very idea of a museum, and urged that available funds be used to help modern-day oppressed Jews rather than memorializing those that had died as a result of such oppression. Some non-Jewish Americans argued that it was incumbent upon a Holocaust museum in the nation's capital to consider all of those that died in the Holocaust, including American soldiers, resulting in a more general museum to the Second World War. The most common objection from all factions was that a Holocaust

museum simply did not belong in the United States—let alone on the Washington Mall, a victorious corridor celebrating the nation’s heroes and triumphs.

The Council was more preoccupied with the very real possibility that the Annexes were insufficient for all that the museum meant to accomplish. Council members’ admirable dedication to the project could not make up for a complete lack of museum experience; idealistic naïveté was quickly becoming an obstacle to success. Seasoned museum professional Anna Cohn, formerly of Washington’s B’nai B’rith Klutznick Museum, was hired as Director of Museum Planning. Cohn suggested the demolition of one annex and the construction of a new building. While sorry to lose an evocative structure, the chance to build the museum from scratch offered the opportunity to transmit an original message through architecture.

iii. Crafting an Architectural Statement

Unlike a museum constructed within the framework of a pre-existing architectural space, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum building was created to communicate the emotions and ideas that the visitor encounters inside. An imposing façade of brick and stone rises over 14th Street. The building is stark and geometric. Its simple lines and unadorned brickwork recall the factories of early industrial America. A six-sided stone tower containing the Hall of Remembrance references the six million Jews killed by the Nazis. The exterior of the Museum is sufficiently somber, creating a mood of contemplation without inflicting excessive melancholia on the prospective visitor.

Once inside, the steel girder ceiling of the Hall of Witness looms overhead. The appearance is raw and unfinished, giving an impression that the space was created in

haste with a specific, limited purpose in mind—much like the simple, functional buildings constructed for the orchestration of the Final Solution. In similarly subtle ways, the architecture of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum recalls the architecture of concentration camps and killing centers. Without appearing heavy-handed, the Museum uses steel, brick, stone, and glass to evoke camp architecture without imitating it. A duplicate of a concentration camp barrack would be hopelessly out of place in downtown Washington, D.C.; not only would such an inauthentic building downplay the horror of the Holocaust by implying that a scene of atrocities can be created as easily as a movie set, a reproduction could very easily come off as a mockery of the genuine article. The Museum building does not fall into the trap of imitation. Cold materials create an environment of emotional, if not physical, discomfort. The visitor finds herself searching for the comfort of a softly curving line within this spare, calculated space. The severe simplicity of both interior and exterior echo the gravity of the story that is told in the galleries without creating excessive drama. The edifice offers no respite from its own precision. This is sufficient to move the visitor into a challenging psychological space that prepares her for that which she is about to see.

The museum's very presence on the Mall can be viewed not only as the government's desire to remember the Holocaust, but as a reference to America as the heroic intercessor in the Second World War. For example, consider the photograph of US soldiers surveying charred human remains at a concentration camp that confronts the viewer upon entering the permanent exhibit. This is obviously an image of horrific suffering, yet it can also be viewed as a scene of much-needed American intervention: although the American forces were too late to save the unfortunate individuals now

reduced to ash and bone, the viewer can presume that the soldiers will now proceed to liberate the remaining camp inmates. This photograph, the first image that the visitor sees, is not only Holocaust-centered, but American-centered—an interesting initial statement for a museum dedicated to events befalling non-Americans on foreign soil.

iv. Interpreting the Unthinkable

As a museum dedicated to an extremely disturbing period in history, the planning committee faced unique interpretive questions. The issue of trauma and suffering was central to the museum's existence; the communication of such trauma in a way that would educate but not alienate the public was a complex task. Council members offered differing perspectives on potential exhibits. For example, some councilors visualized a shower room where the doors slammed shut and a voice announced that this was the last thing that millions of Jews saw. Obviously, this was viewed as a drastic interpretive measure. The exhibition planners were well aware of the risk of creating a gruesome Holocaust theme park—the council wished to use the emotive value of images and artifacts without exploiting the humans to whom the objects were attached, to communicate the chilling chain of events without creating a sense of macabre titillation.

A visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum begins in the Hall of Witness, where each visitor is presented with the “passport” of a Holocaust victim or survivor. Each page features a segment of the individual's story, and corresponds to a different floor in the Museum. A video of American GIs and their reactions to the concentration camps plays in the elevator as visitors are transported to the fourth floor, where the exhibition begins. Upon emerging from the elevators, viewers are faced with

the aforementioned photograph of the liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camp: a stark image of the results of that which they are about to see in the Museum. The Museum is experienced from top to bottom. The fourth floor chronicles the rise of National Socialism in Germany; the third floor details ghettos, deportation, and death camps; while the second floor addresses “resistance and rescue, children and killers, liberation and emigration” as well as a video of survivors sharing their stories.¹³

Although approximately one thousand objects are displayed in the permanent collection, the bulk of the exhibition is photographic. In some ways, this results in a rather stark documentary view that is in opposition to the emotional currency of direct experience transmitted by historical artifacts. As if to lessen the colder approach of photographic documentation, efforts are made to preserve the humanity of the victims of the Holocaust whenever possible. For example, scholar Yaffa Eliach’s collection of photographs of the citizens of her Lithuanian shtetl occupies a tower gallery visible from every floor of the museum. Visitors are confronted with the story of the shtetl’s destruction on the fourth floor, and continue to encounter its occupants (ninety percent of whom were killed by the Einsatzgruppen) on subsequent floors for the duration of the museum tour.

The issues of physical and spiritual resistance caused internal stress for the museum council. Some council members wished to accentuate acts of physical resistance in ghettos and camps (such as the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising) in order to dispel the common belief that Jews passively accepted Nazi policy. This approach is common in Israeli Holocaust museums. Others felt that it was important to emphasize the ways in which people preserved their prior lives through spiritual resistance—that creating art,

¹³ Linenthal 167

playing music, covertly celebrating Jewish holidays, or falling in love could play a role in survival. The over-arching concern was that museum visitors would interpret resistance as the rule when it was in fact an exception. The viewer might then assume that every camp inmate had the time and resources to engage in acts of physical and spiritual resistance, leading back to the faulty conclusion that Jews chose their fate by failing to take advantage of opportunity.

The perpetrators themselves do not have a strong presence in the museum narrative. This is a conscious decision: the planning team did not want to create a grim fascination with the machinery of death and with those that created it. Council member Sybil Milton explains this choice by stating that the museum is essentially a memorial to the suffering of the victims, and as such chooses to limit the presence of those that inflicted that suffering. Nazi artifacts such as flags, uniforms, and propaganda possess a certain dark allure—they are mysterious, disturbing, and fascinating to the point that they may distract from the real purpose of the museum by enshrining the perpetrators. The museum remains a memorial above all things, and echoes memorials of the plaque-and-statue variety with limited acknowledgement of those that caused the event that is being memorialized. True, Nazis exist in the Holocaust Museum, but their role is fairly peripheral. Stock images of Hitler that one might find in any school history book are omitted in favor of photographs of some of the multitude of nameless Nazis—men not sufficiently infamous for prosecution at Nuremberg; men who most likely returned to normal lives after serving as cogs in a vast killing machine. The addition of a few select Nazi photographs and artifacts was deemed essential to the Museum, for, “without [the

perpetrators'] presence, the human face of evil in the Holocaust was missing.¹⁴” Such an omission could unwittingly leave the visitor with the impression that the Holocaust was orchestrated by a mysterious, unearthly power that wanted to eliminate the Jews. The museum council wished to emphasize that these events were the work of human against human. Thus, the permanent exhibit contains photographs of Nazis in action, but avoids the mystique of the macabre by limiting the display of objects touched and handled by perpetrators.

Perhaps the most difficult decision for the exhibitions planning committee arose over the display of items on long-term loan from the museum at Auschwitz. This collection included bunk beds, canisters of Zyklon-B gas, a wide variety of personal effects confiscated from inmates upon arrival, and nine kilograms of human hair. It was this last item that caused the most controversy. Hair shorn from female inmates was exported from Auschwitz and used to make yarn and felt. Upon the liberation of Auschwitz, Russian troops discovered seven thousand kilograms of hair awaiting shipment.¹⁵ Despite the biological fact (confirmed through rabbinical consultation) that hair is composed of dead cells, it remains an identifying feature of the individual. While shoes and toothbrushes, hand mirrors and blouses evoke an individual, hair is a part of the human body—connected to a person by nature rather than by association. The decision to display the bundles of hair passed by majority vote, but was reevaluated at the request of several survivor councilors. One vocal survivor offered the observation that, for all she knew, this hair could have belonged to members of her own family. There was no way to effectively connect the hair to the individuals from which it came; anonymity

¹⁴ Linenthal 199

¹⁵ Linenthal 211

is an inevitable aspect of the bundles. Thus, questions arose as to whether so human an object helped to illustrate the suffering of persecuted individuals, or served to further objectify them.

The hair served a different purpose in the context of the Auschwitz Memorial Museum. Within the walls of the original camp buildings, personal items take on a grim authenticity that cannot be replicated. Confined in a building created to evoke the architecture of the concentration camps, in a country where the Holocaust is for many only an idea, the hair runs the risk of becoming theatrical—a prop in the reenactment of tragedy. This directly contradicts the museum’s most urgent task: that of rendering the Holocaust both an historical and a personal event. At such an impasse, the representation of “truth” becomes confusing. The council elected to include photographs of bundles of human hair in the exhibition, a choice which, for some museum staff, amounted to the dilution of fact. Martin Smith, former director of the permanent exhibition, was vocal about his objection to a decision that he attributed to political influence. “In the end,” stated Smith “there are people so concerned about not upsetting people that they are willing to hold back on telling the truth of the Holocaust...But [the hair] is not going to be there, and this is part and parcel of the whole problem of a museum about this subject, being in Washington D.C., and being on the Mall. In the end, you mustn’t upset too much. And I don’t think one can ever upset people too much about this.”¹⁶

Any museum presenting an exhibit that deals with potentially traumatic subject matter is forced to self-censor in the interest of the visitor. This may spark internal controversy by affecting the museum’s ability to accurately explore a particular aspect of narrative. How should a museum dedicated to massive trauma accommodate the horror of

¹⁶ Linenthal 215

its own content? Does a museum have a duty—or a right—to water down its material in order to make a story that is more palatable to the viewer? When does self-censorship begin to generate institutional fiction? Debates over the graphic nature of Holocaust photographs and films caused substantial planning difficulties. Museum director Jeshajahu Weinberg was adamant about placing the most disturbing images behind privacy walls, while others considered this action to be overly protective of the museum visitor. Nonetheless, the council admitted a distinct fear that early visitors would classify the museum as overly horrific, a diagnosis that could drastically affect future museum visitorship. While the question of narrative is essential to any museum, it is particularly salient to the culturally-specific museum, which must present an accurate history of a single culture without driving away the general public. An extremely well-funded private museum may operate with little concern for public opinion, while a nationally-supported institution is reliant on governmental approval—and funds. Thus, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was and is influenced by political interests that are not necessarily shared by its council members.

In the early stages of exhibition planning, the council was revisited by one of its earliest conflicts: presidential pressure for the inclusion of non-Jewish Holocaust victims. President Reagan faced a wave of protests from Romani Gypsy activists, criticizing the exclusion of a Roma voice from the museum council. As all council members were presidential appointees, this could be seen as nothing less than a governmental insult to the Gypsy community. President Reagan attempted to rectify the situation with the 1987 appointment of American Roma activist Thomas Duna. Mr. Duna's inclusion in the exhibition planning process revitalized disagreements about interpretation. Duna and his

allies felt that Roma and Sinti Gypsies should be well-represented in the museum, arguing that no other racial group save the Jews had been slated for complete annihilation. German policy had limited the rights of Gypsies well before the passage of the Nuremberg laws, and the Gypsy experience during the Holocaust mirrored the Jewish experience in many ways. However, the death toll was substantially lower given the initial size of the Gypsy population. It was decided that the Gypsies would be acknowledged through select artifacts and label text, but the focus would remain essentially Jewish.

The idea of vying for exhibition space based on the number of lives lost is profoundly disturbing. Parceling out representation in proportion to the number of victims from a specific cultural group implies that the Holocaust can and should be divided into discrete categories. After all, wasn't it the intention of the Nazis to alienate different groups from one another? These self-inflicted divisions reduce the overall horror of the events of the Holocaust, as the atrocities committed against a single group lose power when removed from the larger picture of marginalization, abuse, and murder committed on a massive scale. The competition to claim the most devastating cultural loss at the hands of the Nazis illustrates the unfortunate fact that our world has yet to attain the level of inter-cultural solidarity that was so tragically absent in pre-Holocaust Europe. Indeed, the Jewish culture lost more lives than any other single cultural group under the Nazi regime. Six million voices silenced, six million futures extinguished—the sheer number of Jewish victims is staggering. Yet failure to acknowledge non-Jewish Holocaust victims implies an exclusive claim to memory. Lives ought not to be

quantified into cold statistics, and yet they often are. Sorrow and suffering should not be measured with such false simplicity.

In the early 1980s, the exhibitions committee had unanimously approved the incorporation of the Armenian genocide as a prelude to the Final Solution, citing Hitler's infamous statement, "Who today remembers the destruction of the Armenians?" As museum planning progressed, survivors voiced strong opposition to the association of the two events, arguing that comparison belittled the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Tensions increased when the Turkish government expressed its dismay at the inclusion of the Armenian-Turkish conflict in the museum's permanent exhibition. Diplomatic relations between Turkey and the White House became strained, and the government struggled with the idea of conflict with a NATO ally. Council member Hyman Bookbinder circulated his story of a threat delivered over lunch by a Turkish ambassador, who warned that the fate of Turkish Jews could be affected by the inclusion of the Armenian genocide in the museum.¹⁷ Between political pressure from the White House and internal pressure from survivors, the Council decided on a marginal means of inclusion: the Armenian genocide would be memorialized by printing Hitler's words on a gallery wall, but nothing more. Program director Michael Berenbaum expressed his disappointment, calling the decision "a pedagogical mistake which diminishes our ability to reach out to and include groups who naturally can see in the Holocaust a sensitive metaphor to their own experience...it evinces the politicization of our mission."¹⁸ Although the Armenians are excluded from the permanent exhibition, in time, the museum's educational programming grew to include discussion of the Armenian-Turkish conflict and genocidal

¹⁷ Linenthal 232

¹⁸ Linenthal 235

precedent. Unfortunately, very few Americans are aware of the 1915 Armenian genocide. By omitting the Armenian genocide from historical consciousness, the victims are subject to the double tragedy feared by so many Holocaust survivors: loss of life coupled with erasure of memory.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum places strong emphasis on the inclusion of other cultures in its educational program. These programs may be praised for their inclusiveness or criticized for their tendency to marginalize other narratives. The potency of educational lessons could be reduced by the lack of supporting material within the Museum. A school-age visitor may easily infer that learning about the death of millions of Armenians at the hands of the Turks is interesting, but hardly essential; were it as important as the Holocaust, wouldn't material on this "other" genocide be a prominent part of the Museum? The line between "Holocaust museum" and "genocide museum" is unclear, and controversy over inclusion will most likely continue to trouble those who strongly believe in the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

After fifteen years of planning and struggle, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened to the public with significant pomp and circumstance on April 22, 1993. The opening drew immediate criticism: despite the fact that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum admonishes us to remember the Holocaust and to put a stop to genocide, Bosnia's ethnic cleansing policy was in full effect at the time of the museum's opening. The United States had no plans to intervene. Can the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum be viewed as a successful didactic tool that has elucidated thousands of Americans since its opening? Or, ought it to be dismissed for its apparent failure to educate the very government that sponsored its creation?

The unanimous Congressional vote that created the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum not only ensured that Americans never forget the Holocaust, it served a more self-serving governmental purpose: the creation of a government-sponsored memorial museum would “underscore our national commitment to human rights and human dignity.”¹⁹ The museum fits neatly into the national mythos of liberating the oppressed, welcoming the down-trodden and spreading freedom to other parts of the world. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is the only museum or memorial on the Washington Mall that pays tribute to the memory of an essentially non-American experience. Thus, how is the museum connected to American life? While the Museum was supposedly created to demonstrate the universal relevance of the Holocaust, its creation by the United States government forces the visitor to question the possible filtration of fact. The Holocaust is composed of an infinite number of stories, of which the museum arguably tries to incorporate as many as possible. Nonetheless, the museum contains no reference to America’s practice of aiding war criminals thought to be useful to the Cold War effort, nor does it ask several immense questions: was Europe a secondary venue to the United States’ primary conflict in Asia? Were it not for Pearl Harbor, would America have become involved in the Second World War? And finally, perhaps the most controversial question of all: why didn’t the Allies bomb Auschwitz, or the tracks leading to the camp?

¹⁹ Fath Davis Ruffins. “Culture Wars Won and Lost: Ethnic Museums on the Mall, Part I: The National Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian.” *Radical History Review* 68 (1997): 83.

v. Lessons to be Learned

Perhaps these questions have no answers. It is extremely difficult to criticize an institution with a mission to educate the public about the horrors of the Holocaust in an effort to promote tolerance and understanding. No single museum can reasonably be expected to tell a story from every point of view, or to answer every possible question on a subject. As a museum dedicated to a particular artist is pardoned for not containing his entire body of work, so too must a culturally-specific museum be forgiven for not granting every possible narrative an in-depth exploration. While an art museum could conceivably acquire missing works over a period of time, time all too often allows personal narratives and alternate interpretations of history to slip through society's grasp. The intention to collect many versions of the history of a cultural group ought to be praised. The impossibility of pleasing each and every museum visitor must be recognized. Every story will have its holes. Many cultural narratives will hearken back to earlier events—sometimes even those involving other cultures—that cannot always be addressed within the spatial or emotional confines of a culturally-specific museum.

V. The National Museum of the American Indian

Exhibits representing Native peoples have been a popular component of the American museum community for over a century. Museums dedicated to Native American history can be found in almost every town and city across the country. It seems as if every local historical society contains an elegy to a “lost” Indian tribe that once inhabited the area. Exhibits vary in size and content, but almost always present the history of American Indian peoples from the perspective of the European settler. Dusty arrowheads in glass

cases carry an aura of times long past, evoking images of the traditional European perception of the young Indian brave in war paint and feathered headdress. Such museums of Native American historical objects have worked hand in hand with natural history museums to create an impression of the American Indian as an emblem of a dying race. Costumed Native American figures, dugout canoes, and drums are staples of the traditional natural history museum, which presents the Indian as a part of nature—something on par with an extinct animal—that appeared, evolved, and faded away as a part of the natural course of evolution, only to be superseded by the White man. Even in 2005, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City presents Native American culture in the context of animals, ocean life, birds, and perhaps most tellingly, dinosaurs. European American history has continuously viewed Native Americans through the lens of manifest destiny: the Indian was a doomed, noble savage whose harmony with the natural world created a pristine territory worthy of White settlers; yet his extinction was a necessary catalyst in the European's inheritance of that which would become America.

In the 1980s, the concept of a museum of Native American history was by no means novel, yet the idea of such a museum created and overseen by individuals of Indian ancestry was almost unheard of. A Native American museum designed by Native Americans would severely damage the European myth of the vanishing Indian. How could visitors believe in the extinction of a cultural group engaged in a public celebration of its vibrant, active, enduring way of life? Furthermore, an institution presenting the Indian in his own terms (as opposed to those of the traditionally Caucasian museum

curator) could present messages deeply contradictory to those engrained in the psyche of the museum-going public.

i. Compulsive Collecting: The George Gustav Heye Foundation

With its enormous ethnographic collection, including a substantial assortment of human remains, the Smithsonian Institution had long been a repository for Indian artifacts.

However, the Smithsonian's holdings were surpassed by a somewhat unusual collection amassed for private purposes by wealthy New Yorker George Gustav Heye. <AVOID direct Heye/Heye repetition> Heye had begun to collect Native American objects of all types while working as an electrical engineer in Arizona in 1897. He collected indiscriminately (and often with questionable methods) for his entire adult life, frequently acquiring entire archaeological and ethnographic collections from individuals, tribal groups, and dealers. In 1916, Heye accepted an offer from railroad tycoon Collis Huntington to create the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, as a part of a privately-funded public cultural center on the former John James Audubon farm in Upper Manhattan. Delayed by the onset of the First World War, the museum opened to great public approval in November of 1922. Visitors praised the architecture, surroundings, and collection, and embraced the opportunity to experience the exoticism of Native America without leaving the Bronx. SIDE NOTE: This Heye guy sounds a bit like Lea Rosh in her quest for Jewish issues. What drove Heye so much in his fascination with things native American? It would be very interesting to learn about this, but obviously not necessarily in your thesis here...

Within a few years, the collection that had once outgrown Heye's spacious Madison Avenue apartment showed signs of outgrowing its new home. Heye responded by creating a research branch in Pelham Bay, which housed anthropological study collections, a laboratory, and a garden of authentic Indian crops tended by local schoolchildren. Heye's insatiable need to collect was at its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, when he was known to acquire thousands of objects per year. He continued to actively collect until his death in 1957. By the 1980s, the popularity of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation and the Bronx Research Annex had dwindled. Heye's collection was regarded as an interesting but idiosyncratic conglomeration of Native American materials worthy of public attention, but in need of major systematic and scholarly inventory and evaluation. The Smithsonian Institution saw this collection of 800,000 objects as a valuable potential acquisition. Meanwhile, the government was beginning to take notice of the controversy surrounding Native artifacts. The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs began hearing bills on the repatriation of human remains in 1987; this proposed legislation would eventually become the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. A preliminary hearing revealed that the Smithsonian "was in possession of over 18,500 human remains of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians."²⁰ Committee members were horrified by this statistic, which Committee Vice President Daniel K. Inouye (D-HI) describes as "the impetus to establish a memorial on the National Mall that might serve as a final resting place for those remains that could not be identified as being associated with a particular

²⁰ United States, One Hundred Eighth Congress, *Status of the Completion of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004) 2.

tribe, Native community, or family and thus returned.”²¹ After Committee members toured the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, the vision of a Smithsonian museum dedicated to Native Americans began to take shape.

On May 8, 1989 the Smithsonian and the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding detailing a full transfer of the Museum’s collection to the Smithsonian with the understanding that the Smithsonian would preserve the Native American presence in New York by creating a new museum in Lower Manhattan. The physical transfer of the MAI collection officially began in June of 1989, following the receipt of State Supreme Court approval to transport the collection out of New York. All MAI employees became Smithsonian employees.

ii. **The Creation of “*A Native Place*”**

Six months after the transfer was initiated, President George Bush signed legislation creating “an institution of living culture dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of the Native Peoples of the Western Hemisphere.”²² From the beginning, the National Museum of the American Indian was intended to be a part of the greater Smithsonian Institution network, thus securing a place in the United States government’s national museum.

Any nationally sanctioned museum has the unspoken duty to present the true and accurate story. This is particularly challenging in the case of the National Museum of the American Indian, which is faced with the task of contradicting traditional museum

²¹ *Status of the Completion of the National Museum of the American Indian*, 2.

²² “Smithsonian Selects Architectural Firm to Design Museum of American Indian,” *Cherokee Advocate* 30 April 1993: 10.

treatment of Native American culture as a thing of the past. As effectively stated by James D. Nason in his essay "*Our*" *Indians: The Unidimensional Indian and the Disembodied Local Past*, "what museum exhibitions wittingly or unwittingly portrayed and often continue to portray is the impression that Native Americans [have] disappeared into a particular kind of historical past."²³ For decades, museums have been educating visitors in the myth of the disappearing Indian—thus leading to a belief that "real" Indians no longer exist. While museum exhibits on Native American cultures have barely evolved over the past century, curatorial attitudes towards the objects themselves have changed significantly in the context of the Indian Rights Movement, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, visitor research, and new developments in exhibition technology.

The National Museum of the American Indian would not only communicate history through an exclusively Native voice, it would do so in four unique component institutions. The National Museum of the American Indian on the Washington Mall would serve as the flagship for the entire project; however, the generous amount of time allotted for its construction left a gap in the exhibition of Indian-centered art and artifacts. Two locations would fill this void: the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland would house the objects acquired from the Museum of the American Indian until the Mall building was complete. The transport of these objects was itself a massive undertaking and the Center's holdings grew on an almost daily basis as shipments arrived over the course of five years. The George Gustav Heye Center opened in 1994 in Lower Manhattan's Customs House with three inaugural exhibitions of artifacts selected from

²³ W. Richard West, ed. *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2000) 38.

the Heye collection by Native artists and cultural leaders. The fourth component is less tangible in nature. Museum planners were forced to recognize the fact that the vast majority of American Indians live outside the Mid-Atlantic region and may never visit Washington, D.C. Therefore, the Museum maintains active relationships with tribal councils and leaders. Lending programs allow Museum objects to travel to Native community centers and tribal museums for educational and spiritual purposes, while constant dialog cultivates collaboration on future Museum projects such as guest curatorship and program planning.

The Museum was, and still is, governed by a twenty-five member board. Sixteen board seats are always occupied by Indians, ensuring a majority representation. The board cited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as an inspiration; some members reportedly expressed an interest in creating a museum that “would be part Louvre, part Holocaust Museum.”²⁴ As a Smithsonian museum, the National Museum of the American Indian would receive a generous two-thirds of its funding from the government. The remaining portion would be acquired through corporate, individual, and tribal donations. Tribal monies proved to be the most controversial. Generous donations were offered by several tribes operating casinos on reservation land. Certain board members were hesitant to taint the Museum with what some might construe as ill-gotten funds. The stereotypical association of modern Indians with gaming was considered undesirable, but the large gifts were accepted in favor of the bigger picture: the creation of an institution that would celebrate Native America while seeking to abolish prejudices toward the Indian community.

²⁴ Francis X. Clines, “Smithsonian Museum Making Room for Indian Museum,” New York Times 29 September 1999: A14.

The National Museum of the American Indian takes a strictly Indian perspective that interprets Indian culture both on its own and in contact with other societies. The challenge, of course, is the breadth of perspective among Native Americans. Opinions vary according to age, tribal affiliation, and experience. As with the planning of the Holocaust museum, some Indians that had attained a type of survivor status through mandatory re-education at government boarding schools, consistent discrimination, or loss of land viewed the planned museum through more commemorative eyes. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO), a Northern Cheyenne, envisioned the National Museum of the American Indian as “a monument to millions of native people who died of sickness, slavery, starvation, and war.”²⁵ Others viewed the Museum as less of a monument to the past than a celebration of the present and future. A national museum memorializing the tragedies that have befallen Native America would be little more than a government-sanctioned addition to the vast museological myth of the American Indian as a vanishing—or worse yet, vanished—piece of American culture. Museum director Rick West, a Southern Cheyenne, has been affiliated with the museum project since 1990. West views the Museum as a solemn and celebratory space that is “in many ways, more a hemispheric institution of living cultures than ... a museum in the traditional sense, because our view of Native cultures is as prospective as it is retrospective.”²⁶

Construction workers broke ground on a 4.25 acre lot at the foot of Capitol Hill in 1998. A formal ceremony allowed tribal representatives to cast soil from sacred burial grounds onto the site, preparing the land for its new purpose. This echoed the solemn

²⁵ James Dao and Jessica MacDonald, “Drums and Bells Open Indian Museum,” *New York Times* 22 September 2004: A14.

²⁶ West 8

ceremony that marked the beginning of construction on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum several years before.

Located just east of the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian is a unique architectural presence on the Mall. The architectural planning committee envisioned the museum as a nature-inspired structure hewn by the elements. Attention would be given to Native concerns and suggestions regarding structure, landscape, and decoration. The result is a massive ochre monolith that recalls Southwestern cave dwellings. Covered with Minnesotan Kasota dolomitic limestone, the building is flowing and organic with an undulating facade. This overall roundness is echoed throughout the exhibition spaces through small, circular galleries and wave-like partitioning walls showcasing various objects. Undoubtedly interesting to the eye, this structure intended to pay homage to a group of cultures inextricably tied to nature is a striking departure from its more traditionally Neo-Classical neighbors—although it would probably look more “natural” in New Mexico or Arizona.

The building itself is only a part of the museum landscape; the edifice occupies one quarter of the lot, with the remaining space devoted to carefully landscaped natural settings appropriate to the Washington, D.C. area: a small wetland to the east; croplands planted with indigenous species to the south; a woodland to the north; and a meadowland to the west. Markers indicate the cardinal directions, while the entryway and main plaza face east in accordance with a common Indian traditional belief OR: Indian tradition that doorways face the rising sun. A crashing waterfall greets the visitor at the northwest corner of the building. Water wraps, mote-like, around the north side of the building.

enveloping an outdoor performance area as it becomes a calm river leading to the main entrance.

iii. Revising a National Narrative

The eighteenth Smithsonian museum opened to great fanfare on September 21, 2004. As a new and popular destination, the Museum uses free timed passes to regulate visitor traffic.²⁷ The visitor enters the domed Potomac lobby area, named both for the nearby river and the Algonquian/Powhatan term meaning “where the goods are brought in.” A full four stories in height, the Potomac serves as a welcome area, performance space, and architectural focal point of the museum interior. A tremendous sense of openness encourages the visitor to absorb the calming atmosphere of a welcome respite from city streets. Hundreds of Native words of welcome are projected on the curving Welcome Wall. The Potomac was designed to communicate the traditional Indian values of hospitality (which, Museum planners admit, has led to the demise of many tribal groups in the past). The space also hosts contemporary performances and child-friendly demonstrations on themes such as the making of dugout canoes.

At opening, the National Museum of the American Indian features five exhibitions comprised of 7,000 objects—a mere fraction of an approximately one million-piece collection, most of which is housed in the Suitland branch. Twenty-four tribes from North, South, and Central American are featured, with the intention that exhibit rotation will allow the Museum to address other tribal groups in the future. The inaugural exhibitions contain objects from more than one thousand communities.

²⁷ According to the Smithsonian website, the Museum reportedly anticipates between 4 and 6 million visitors per annum.

As with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the visitor begins on the top floor and works her way down. Elevator doors decorated with incised bird motifs open to carry the visitor to the fourth floor. A 13-minute film entitled “Who We Are” serves as an introduction to the Museum from a Native American perspective. The visitor progresses around the curving outer wall of the Lelawi Theater to enter *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World*. Wall text at the exhibit entrance informs the visitor that she will “discover how celestial bodies shape our daily lives and establish our calendars of ceremonies and celebrations.”²⁸ *Our Universes* features a sprawling floor plan in which narrow passages and cul-de-sac galleries radiate from a C-shaped central area. The main area is dimly lit; small pinpricks of light overhead illuminate important constellations in the night sky. The atmosphere is intimate and peaceful, while narrow passages leading to small tribal galleries give the space a sense of inviting secrecy. Eight tribes are represented in *Our Universes*: the K’apovi of New Mexico, Anishinaake of South Central Canada, Lakota of South Dakota, Quechua of the Peruvian Andes, Hupa of Northwestern California, Q’ca’chi Maya of Guatemala, Mapuche of Chile, and Yupik of Alaska. Each section was curated by a group of representatives from the respective tribe—and interesting and logical decision, considering that the stories of several individuals are often more engaging than the history of a faceless group. Guest curators vary in age, gender, and profession. Photographs and brief biographies of each contributor appear at the entrance to the tribe’s gallery, offering the viewer a sense of acquaintanceship with the exhibition planners. Additionally, the photographs create a curatorial presence that serves as a constant reminder of the authenticity of the objects and stories on exhibition. Acknowledgment of the curatorial staff by name, let alone by

²⁸ Emil Her Many Horses, excerpted from wall text, National Museum of the American Indian, 2003.

photograph, is fairly unusual in a gallery space. This decision illustrates the Museum's goal to present Native America as a network of living, evolving tribal groups composed of vibrant individuals. It also reinforces the "Indian-ness" of the institution, actively contradicting traditional White interpretation of Indian artifacts: the objects before the viewer were made, used, and selected for display by American Indians.

The creation of culturally appropriate environments makes each gallery space a unique reflection of indigenous views of the cosmos and its impact on tribal life. For example, the Lakota gallery is circular in reference to Lakota belief in the cyclicity of nature. The circular space is divided into the four cardinal directions of North, South, East, and West. Each direction is associated with a color, animal group, and stage of life; these principles are explained and illustrated through objects. No detail has been omitted—even the carpet is sectioned and color-coded to correspond to the cardinal directions. The Yupik gallery is constructed in the form of a traditional men's house, where Yupik men gather to prepare for whaling expeditions. The gallery cases are filled with artifacts that reflect the Alaskan tribe's ancient and ongoing connection to whaling and the sea.

All sections combine old and new to create a picture of Native America that draws upon past and present. Modern photographs, quotations, and interactive objects are integrated with more traditional ethnographic display, while technological touches give the Museum a cutting-edge feel. Video forms an integral part of *Our Universes*, providing an effective and accessible forum for the discussion of contemporary tribal concerns. Hexagonal in shape and warmly paneled with dark wood, the Hupa gallery incorporates a video on the tribe's current struggle to regain access to waterways used in

traditional canoe ceremonies. Voiceovers and sound effects in various spaces create an aural environment, adding to the sensory experience of the exhibition. Interactive touch screens allow the viewer to further explore tribal perceptions of the universe, such as the Maya calendar and the Quechua idea of the fundamental duality of nature.

From *Our Universes* the visitor passes into the second permanent exhibition space. Also located on the fourth floor, *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories* examines five hundred years of “historical events from a Native point of view.”²⁹ The exhibition begins with a mind-boggling assortment of small objects—fetish figures, ornaments, weapons, and other artifacts—in a gracefully curving wall that stretches into the gallery. The presentation is almost scientific in nature, evoking classification systems found in science museums. Taken together, these stone and gold artifacts have a fragile and fascinating appearance akin to a collection of rare butterflies, while their arrangement in concentric circles and swirls gives the objects a quality of motion rarely found among ethnographic objects. A concave wall to the immediate left contains an area dedicated to European invasion. A map illuminates to show areas of the Americas where Indians fell victim to disease, famine, and other results of European exploration. Wall quotes from contemporary literature give firsthand accounts of death tolls and living conditions for American Indians under colonial rule. A display of portraits of Indians painted by Europeans is accompanied by a video of contemporary Indians discussing historical and ongoing stereotypes of Native Americans in the outside world. When compared to the references to the suffering on view at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the slaughter of Native Americans by Europeans becomes a pale sub-category at the National

²⁹ “Guide to Museums and Galleries” *My Smithsonian*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, vol. 7, no. 1, February 2005.

Museum of the American Indian—an idea that is addressed out of necessity, but not essential to the theme of cultural celebration.

The periphery of the exhibition space contains spaces devoted to eight Indian tribes. Less secluded than those found in *Our Universes*, the tribal spaces are cell-like areas partially enclosed by rounded walls, allowing for a sense of intimacy. Centrally located installations address over-arching challenges to Indian life. Installed in undulating cases that directly reference the museum's architecture, "God's Work" addresses the mission to Christianize American Indians. An imposing wall full of guns speaks to themes of resistance among the Native American community. A circular central area serves as a type of theater. Rounded walls dotted with television screens enclose the area like arms. An anonymous Indian narrator compares the European influence on tribal life to a great storm, relating man-made difficulties such as discrimination, guns, and forced religion to devastating natural phenomena. As he speaks, different images from Native American history appear on the television monitors, always related to the theme of struggle to retain one's culture in the face of adversity. The walls themselves change, varying in color as the narrative progresses. Subtle greens and blues create a watery, stormy atmosphere supplemented by ominous sound effects. Nonetheless, the space is not fully sorrowful: the narrator speaks of learning from the great storm. While his voice is melancholy with a trace of irony, he wishes to make it clear that, though often victimized, Indians are not opposed to change—and in many cases embrace it. This is possibly the most commemorative area of the Museum, paying homage to a tragic past through words and images while acknowledging both present and future. And representing native Americans more comprehensively as subjects with historical, social, and political agency.

This theme is further developed on the third floor in *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identity in the 21st Century*. Of the three main exhibitions, this is the one that most actively combats the myth of the disappearing Indian. The setup is similar to that found in the other two exhibitions. The outer wall contains small, partly-enclosed areas dedicated to eight different tribes. Again, tribal curators were used to grant authenticity to the display. Objects on exhibit are thoroughly modern: contemporary t-shirts from Indian youth gatherings; books used in reservation schools; magazines featuring Native American athletes; and a tank-like vehicle that has replaced the dogsled for one Alaskan tribe. Images of old and new are frequently juxtaposed. A video of Yupik men hunting seal on snowmobile is a short distance from photographs of modern Indians engaged in ceremonies that have remained unchanged for centuries. One of the most visually appealing sections focuses on traditional crafts made from modern materials; among them, a basket woven from 35mm film and a pair of high-topped sneakers intricately beaded with images of the artist's children. Another notable section speaks to the Indian city-dweller's unique task of preserving heritage in urban areas far removed from the reservation.

Central areas address the challenges facing nearly all American Indian groups in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The most controversial topics are present only as statistics—poverty and gaming are acknowledged thus, while the startling rate of alcoholism among Native Americans is more or less ignored. Racial diagnostics and prejudices are addressed, as well as traditional museum treatment of Indian remains. This is illustrated most effectively by a 1987 photograph of an Indian performance artist posing in a 19th-century museum vitrine. While the exhibition explores Indian identity as

a function of community, spirituality, language, and location, it also investigates the notion that “Native identity has also been influenced by a legacy of legal policies that have sought to determine who is Indian and who is not.”³⁰ Beyond focusing on past iniquities, *Our Lives* celebrates the triumphs and struggles of what the Museum calls “survivance,” or, the continued efforts of American Indian groups to transcend mere survival by retaining tradition in the context of modernity.

While all of the major exhibits are visually appealing, the interactive nature of *Windows on Collections* makes it particularly engaging. Located in the atrium space above the Potomac on the floors three and four, *Windows* has the appearance of a traditional ethnographic cabinet of curiosities. Objects from different tribes and time periods are placed in a series of floor-to-ceiling vitrines. Were it not for the presence of touch screens in front of each case, the display would be somewhat unintelligible. The touch screens allow the visitor to open “drawers” full of objects and select those that interest them. A virtual magnifying glass can be manipulated to show object detail, while artifacts with designs on more than one side can be digitally rotated. Images are crisp, clear, and accompanied by short textual explanations. Through *Windows*, the Museum provides a virtual handling collection that appeals to visitors of all ages while protecting easily damaged artifacts. While nothing can replace the tactile sensation of exploring an object with ones hands, this exhibit provides a technological alternative that protects the collection from wear and tear beyond that which the artifacts were designed to receive. For many, the novelty of the touch screen may prove more fascinating than the act of handling actual objects. The visitor also benefits from a tremendous amount of easily accessible information provided in a format more interesting than the traditional text label.

³⁰ <http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=exhibitions&second=dc>

The National Museum of the American Indian boasts not one, but two large museum shops. Located on the ground floor, the Chesapeake museum store is something of a gallery of contemporary Native American art. Geared toward the seasoned art collector, Chesapeake offers pottery, textiles, jewelry, and other crafts by Native American artists. The bulk of the pieces for sale fall into the category of “traditional.” While touted as contemporary art, the selection of carved masks, baskets, and other objects unconsciously reinforces the idea of the Indian as frozen in time—eternally reproducing the art of his ancestors, now created for sale to an elite rather than use by a community. The environment is somehow reminiscent of George Gustav Heye’s continuous acquisition of Indian artifacts: in this shop, the Museum visitor can purchase her very own piece of disappearing Native America.

For the less discerning (or less wealthy) visitor, the Roanoke Museum Store is more along the lines of a souvenir shop. Roanoke offers various tokens emblazoned with the Museum’s logo, as well as an assortment of Indian-themed items such as Pendleton wool blankets, smudging sticks, and hacky sacks. An impressive collection of books available for purchase does little to ease the discomfort of encountering the sale of stereotypical Indian objects. In an institution dedicated to educating the public about the realities of American Indian life, particularly the modern experience, dream catchers and the obligatory turquoise jewelry seem to belittle the mission. After an educational journey through time and space, the visitor enters a gift shop where she is reminded that American Indians can still be reduced to beaded trinkets and miniature canoes—even here, at the National Museum of the American Indian.

iv. The Authority of Authenticity

The Museum is not without its challenges. Any museum attempting to represent a vast cultural group made up of unique smaller communities will face criticism for under-representing some communities in favor of others. The National Museum of the American Indian makes frequent use of tribal curators and multiple voices. One would expect a degree of variation of opinion among members of the same tribe that is not encountered. Repeated claims to authenticity through words such as “we” and “our” in wall text, labels, and video reassert the Museum’s status as an institution that speaks with a Native American voice. If this repetition seems heavy-handed at times, one must only consider the unspoken “we” of the traditional museum to understand its place here.

VI. The National Museum of African American History and Culture

The presence of two culturally-specific museums on the Washington Mall, one of them dedicated to an event that occurred on foreign soil, has fueled the argument for the creation of a free-standing museum dedicated to African American history.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s led to a new interest in a more accurate social history. As historically disenfranchised groups gained a voice in the American social and political scenes, the desire for public recognition of several centuries of ignored history led to the formation of African American museums throughout the country. “Before about 1970 African Americans were simply missing from most official formulations of American history,” an omission that the African American museum movement sought to remedy.³¹

³¹ Fath Davis Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: The National African American Museum Project.” *Radical History Review* 70 (1998): 79.

i. The African American Museum Tradition

The concept of the African American museum was not a new one; on the contrary, African American museums are the oldest culturally-specific museums in the country. Howard University's Hampton Institute was founded as early as 1868, with a mandate to further the study of the African American experience. Over the course of the next one hundred years, an assortment of museums—most of which were fairly small and local in scope—sprang up in communities across the United States. The African American Museum Association (AAMA), an independent umbrella organization for African American museums, was conceived in 1969 and developed in 1977.

Congress began to consider the possibility of the creation of a national African American in the late 1970s. In 1981, Congress passed legislation authorizing the establishment of the National Afro-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio. The museum was intended to be national in scope, yet Wilberforce was criticized as “a rural location far from the center of national power and international visibility.”³² The museum's placement far from the nation's capital was seen by some as an attempt to placate the African American community while further marginalizing an important and emotional cause. Also, despite its national status, the museum would exist on state—not federal—funds. The museum opened in 1997, and is still in existence.

ii. Ideas and Objections

It was a Washington, D.C. businessman that brought the idea of an African American museum on the Washington Mall into the public spotlight. A prominent African

³² Ruffins, African American Museum Project 80.

American entrepreneur, Tom Mack owned the successful Tourmobile, Inc. bus company. In the eyes of many, Mack's allegedly altruistic intentions were tainted by the perception of his business motives: a previously untapped market, African American tourists visiting a culturally-specific museum could generate substantial revenue for a bus company already enjoying an exclusive contract for Mall touring. Mack was also disconnected from the museum community. He made several public statements expressing inaccurate information on the status of African American museums, and was apparently unaware of the existence of the African American Museum Association. As the leading voice for advocacy in the world of ethnically specific institutions, AAMA affiliation with the project may have granted it some much-needed legitimacy. Conversely, the withholding of an institutional endorsement showed a lack of faith in Mack's plans.

At first glance, one would expect the AAMA to support a proposed National Museum of African American History as an important advancement of its organizational mission to educate Americans about a largely neglected aspect of the nation's history. On the contrary, many AAMA member institutions saw a national museum as a potential drain on resources. Small museums foresaw a government-run institution on the Washington Mall that siphoned public and private funding from lower profile museums, many of which were already struggling for support. Difficulties could also arise on the collecting front: donors would likely be eager to donate important objects to a prominent national institution boasting the glamour of novelty, publicity, and national appeal rather than a small museum focusing on the regional history of the African American community. Several Congress people with museums in their districts expressed similar concerns for their constituency. A fear that a Mall museum would "relieve historically

white Smithsonian museums from their responsibility to include Black people in their narratives” disturbed many African Americans, who saw the creation of a specifically African American history museum as a governmental endorsement of the segregation of African Americans from America’s accepted historical myths.

The Smithsonian seemed like a natural starting point for any potential Washington, D.C museum in need of support. Since 1967, the Smithsonian had been running the Anacostia Museum dedicated to African American history. When approached about the possibility of an African American museum on the Mall, certain members of the Smithsonian Institution Board of Regents were hesitant to believe that there was sufficient available material to create a free-standing museum independent of the Anacostia. A committee was formed to examine the possibility of a National African American History Museum under Smithsonian jurisdiction. The committee was charged with evaluating the viability of creating a collection of African American artifacts large enough to fill a new museum. Collectors of early African Americana are often faced with a lack of tangible or archaeological evidence. While Native American objects have long been viewed as quaint curiosities to be collected for study, slave artifacts have historically failed to generate comparable interest in European Americans. Likewise, many early African American objects were made to serve a functional purpose; their inherently disposable nature led to destruction through use. Church and court records, early published slave narratives, and primitive films and photographs offered invaluable historical insight in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Despite concerns to the contrary, the committee identified more than 20,000 potential acquisitions from individuals and institutions—more than enough to begin a national collection.

iii. Addressing the “American Holocaust”

The issue of slavery surfaced again and again during initial discussions of the creation of a National African American History Museum. How much of the museum should be devoted to the topic? Would the museum function as a memorial to slavery, or a monument to African American triumphs in the face of adversity? Museum supporters were drawn to the proposed United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a model upon which a memorial to the “American Holocaust” of slavery could be based. Proponents argued that, while Holocaust survivors and their families had had the satisfaction of the Nuremberg Trials, the creation of the State of Israel, and the establishment of a memorial museum on the Washington Mall, African Americans had yet to experience the closure that an official—and permanent—public condemnation of the perpetrators of slavery would bring. A national museum would acknowledge the existence of slavery and ongoing inequality in the United States. While no single institution will remedy the problems of racism, a government-sponsored museum devoted to these themes would serve as an admission of past wrongs. Does the National Museum of African American History and Culture as yet exist only on paper because those past wrongs are still so immediate?

The African American museum community stood divided on the point of a national museum. A group of concerned individuals had created a committee dedicated to convincing the Smithsonian Board of Regents that a new, free-standing African American history museum was essential to the Smithsonian museum complex. Unfortunately, the committee was neither racially nor professionally diverse; it was also

rife with internal conflict. The committee report took what was perhaps an overly optimistic view of the museum's place in the Washington, D.C. community, and failed to address the museum's possible impact on the mythos of American history. Critics argued that a Mall museum addressing, if not dedicated to, slavery "would be tantamount to a Holocaust Memorial in Auschwitz,³³ not Washington, D.C. [because] it would be erected within sight of locations where slave pens stood during the 1850s and the early years of the Civil War."³⁴ A museum of African American history located in close proximity to memorials to Washington and Jefferson, founding fathers and known slaveholders, would place the African American experience in a context that many White Americans would likely find uncomfortable.

Many AAMA members were still opposed to the establishment of a museum on the Mall that could potentially rob small museums of public funding. These museum professionals argued for the creation of a national public trust that would act as "a kind of reparation for depredations wrought on Black cultural life."³⁵ Securing private funding has long been an obstacle to African American museums. This difficulty is often classified as a modern repercussion of the forced economic hardship of enslavement and the era before the Civil Rights movement. It is often argued that the intergenerational poverty seen in some segments of the African American community is a direct result of the practice of slavery. By creating this trust, Congress would appropriate funds for the creation and perpetual maintenance of a national museum; an additional \$50 million would be distributed to smaller African American institutions across the country. This

³³ There is in fact a Holocaust memorial center at Oswiecim (Auschwitz), Poland. It has drawn heated criticism from the Jewish community for its focus on ethnically Polish camp inmates as opposed to Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The museum's visitors are predominantly non-Jewish Poles.

³⁴ Ruffins, African American Museum Project 91.

³⁵ Ruffins, African American Museum Project 90.

ambitious idea was pitched to a Republican Congress committed to balancing the federal budget by cutting financial support to the arts, leaving organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities with little funding to dispense. Needless to say, the trust failed to come to fruition.

A group of wealthy African Americans led by Tom Mack was fervently supportive of a national museum, but vehemently opposed to Smithsonian involvement. By that latter part of the twentieth century, many cultural groups had come to the conclusion that complete integration into White America resulted in little more than the erasure of a minority presence. Sameness through integration offered no recognition of the African American experience. A national African American museum under the jurisdiction of the Smithsonian Institution would run the risk of presenting Black history from a White perspective. At the same time, isolating African American history from the “official” version of American history presented in the national museum system could negatively reinforce the idea of ethnic separateness. Where should the line be drawn between celebration and segregation? project

iv. From Museum Project to National Venture

On December 16, 2003, President George W. Bush signed legislation authorizing the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture as an element of the Smithsonian Institution system of museums. The museum will be governed by the Smithsonian Institution’s Board of Regents, which will receive advice and recommendations from the newly created National Museum of African American History and Culture Council. The Council held its first meeting on February 8, 2005; the

dominant topic of conversation was the organization of a survey to analyze potential museum sites recommended by Congress. The museum received its first financial allotment of \$3.9 million from the Federal Government in 2005.³⁶ While the expenditures associated with selecting a site, building a collection, and staffing the museum cannot be determined at present, Congress has agreed to appropriate one-half of the final cost of the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The remaining funds will be solicited from private donors.

Of the four sites under consideration, the most promising—and most controversial—is the Arts and Industries Building of the Smithsonian Institution.³⁷ The building is currently vacant and undergoing rehabilitation. Employees of the Smithsonian visitor center declined to comment on the purpose of the current renovations when this author sought more information in March 2005. Opponents such as Judy Feldman, president of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, dispute the establishment of another culturally-specific museum on or adjoining the Washington Mall for fear that the cultural museum movement will eventually overwhelm this important open space.³⁸ The argument that making use of an existing building would in no way further clutter the Mall does not convince detractors who predict the ensuing construction of a Mall museum for a slew of minority groups in an effort to be politically correct.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture will be “the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, art,

³⁶ <http://nmaahc.si.edu/funding/default/htm>

³⁷ The other sites include a lot between Constitution and Madison Avenues, the Liberty Loan site at 14th Street Southwest, and the Banneker Overlook at the L’Enfant Plaza.

³⁸ “National Black Museum Site Hinges on Symbolism,” *Westside Gazette*. Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.: Sep 24, 2003. Vol.32, Iss. 24; pg. 3D

history, and culture. The museum's collections [will address] slavery, post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights movement."³⁹ These themes are currently addressed by the aforementioned Anacostia Museum, also operated by the Smithsonian. Located in southeastern Washington, D.C., the Anacostia Museum has functioned as the capital's Center for African American History and Culture since 1967. The Museum's distance from the Washington Mall has caused those who are aware of its presence to criticize the Smithsonian's decision to physically marginalize African American history in a building far removed from the city's museum corridor; the sheer volume of uninformed activists lamenting Washington's lack of a museum dedicated to the African American experience betrays the Anacostia's place on the fringes of the capital's museum culture. Even the free *My Smithsonian* guide refers to the Anacostia Museum in a slim paragraph sandwiched between general membership information and camera policies, while multi-page spreads are devoted to each of the better-known Smithsonian museums. With the impending creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Anacostia Museum faces an uncertain future. Most likely, the collection will be absorbed into that of the new museum.

v. Memorial to Suffering or Monument to Achievement?

Detailed collection and exhibition plans are unavailable to the public at this time. As the National Museum of African American History and Culture develops, it will be interesting to see the place that slavery comes to occupy in the institutional narrative.

Will the Museum adopt slavery as its focus, assuming a memorial function comparable to that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum? Will the status of slavery as a

³⁹ <http://nmaahc.si.edu/>

dark chapter in American history cause the government-operated Smithsonian Institution to favor more uplifting topics such as the fight for Civil Rights and the artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance?

At this moment in its planning, the National Museum of African American History and Culture has the potential to become either a memorial to tragedy or a monument to triumph. Much like Jewish history, which often seems to be divided into “the Holocaust” and “everything else,” so too does African American history lend itself to compartmentalization. Slavery is undoubtedly an essential aspect of African American history, yet a national museum that favors themes of adversity over all others fails to do justice to the achievements of Black America.

VII. Museums and the Path to Cultural Identity

The museums addressed in this essay share the common mission of increasing awareness of a specific cultural group. Each chooses to pursue this mission in a unique manner. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum focuses on a key event—the Holocaust—in the long history of Jewish culture. This museum operates under the premise that the Holocaust, while arguably not an “American” event, has extensive applications to world cultures; by educating Americans about the events of the Holocaust, the Museum seeks to insure that no such atrocities will ever happen again. This museum is perhaps more event-specific than culturally-specific. While the narrative revolves around the events befalling European Jewry under the Nazi regime (a culturally-specific catastrophe), less attention is given to the background of Jewish culture and theology. Thus, the strictly

cultural aspects of this culturally-specific museum are less of a focal point and more of a backdrop to the story of the Holocaust.

The National Museum of the American Indian pursues an opposite approach to cultural museology. Despite repeated references to the Holocaust Museum as a major source of interpretive inspiration, the National Museum of the American Indian devotes the bulk of its gallery space to the transmission of general cultural information. With sections on tribal views of cosmology, individual identity, and modernity, this Museum focuses on over-arching ideas central to Native American philosophy. The National Museum of the American Indian hints at the tragedies that Native Americans suffered at the hands of European settlers, but never fully takes advantage of the opportunity to tell its own side of the story. The darkest interactions between Indians and Europeans are avoided. The Museum designers were vocal in their intention to present Native American communities as alive and well. The discerning visitor could argue that, in their efforts to emphasize life, the committee has avoided the most salient themes: the unaddressed topics of genocide and suffering are re-packaged as a tribute to the strength and adaptability of Indian communities. As a result of its overwhelming positivity the National Museum of the American Indian becomes less of an historical museum and more of a modern cultural center, where a bright future supercedes a gloomy past.

Only time will answer the many questions relating to the formation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Regardless of the new Museum's approach to the issue of slavery and its place in African American history, some visitors will believe that the Museum devotes too much attention to the topic while others will argue that it is not sufficiently explored. This writer predicts that a third camp

will arise, consisting of individuals that criticize the Museum on the basis that the existence of a free-standing institution for African American cultural artifacts reinforces the classically segregated approach to American history that separates the story of Black America from that of mainstream White society found in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Interestingly, this would echo a similar position of critics of the Holocaust museum...

This brings us to the final question: what does the future hold for the culturally-specific museum? The cultural museum that seems an essential component of national identity today may be viewed as an oddly-celebrated form of segregation within a few decades. Can the culturally-specific museum maintain its power in the face of a world that grows smaller (and supposedly more equal) with each passing day? However uncertain the future of such museums may seem, the present is no more clear.

Controversy surrounds the opening of new cultural museums and memorials in a manner that unites political and cultural bodies with the **museum American, and at times international, museum community.**<<< ??? Something awkward here At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the culturally-specific museum has carved out a niche in the museum world that allows for the recognition, commemoration, and celebration of individual cultural groups. Museums such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture fulfill the current American need to publicly accept—or appear to accept—members of various cultural groups into American society. It is impossible to predict future trends in the museum community, but it will be

fascinating to chart the changes within the culturally-specific museum community as this relatively new movement comes of age and faces the challenges of continued relevance.

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