Crossing Cultural Fences: The Intersecting Material World of American Indians and Euro-Americans

Cindy Ott

This article focuses on the author's exhibition at the Museum of the Rockies entitled "Crossing Cultural Fences," which examined the shared histories and material worlds of Indians and non-Indians in order to complicate popular concepts of racial and ethnic distinctions.

At first glance, the grass-dance bustle in the exhibit seemed typical of many worn by Plains Indians at pow-wows in the early-twentieth century. A broad ring of eagle feathers and puffy, small chicken feathers sewn to a hide backing was attached to three tails of blue wool fabric, from which more feathers and colorful ribbons fluttered during a dance performance. Yet a closer examination of the bustle's central rosette startled most people. Surrounded by a halo of tinsel was a photograph of a Euro-American couple in a passionate embrace, perhaps clipped from a magazine from the 1930s or 1940s. The bustle's central image: a classic Hollywood kiss.

While an iconic Hollywood image might seem like anathema to Plains Indian cultures, a movie house opened on the Crow reservation in 1918, quite early for any American community, suggesting that many there reveled in the new movie industry, like the rest of American society. What are we to make of this intertwining of American Indian and seemingly non-Indian cultural icons and material objects? How can it help us re-interpret and better understand cross-cultural exchanges and perceptions of cultural distinctions between American Indians and Euro-Americans?[1]

Or what about the exhibit's "reservation hat" as it is commonly known? The hat was identifiably a cowboy hat with its wide brim and rounded top, yet it was also undeniably

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Cindy Ott, assistant professor of American Studies at St. Louis University and an independent curator, thanks Bill Yellowtail and the Museum of the Rockies staff.

[1] In the exhibition and in this essay, I mostly analyze at the interconnections between Euro-Americans and Indians. When speaking about broader segments of American society, I use the term "non-Indians."

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an American Indian hat because, as its name suggests, it was popular among Plains Indians in the first half of the twentieth century. Some men adapted the store-bought hat by remolding the crown into a tall point and adding beadwork or feathers to create a distinctly Indian style. Eventually, hat makers, like the Miller Hat Company of Denver, revised their patterns to fit the Indians' design preferences. This particular hat's probable owner was Plenty Hawk, who was a Crow Indian rancher near Lodge Grass, Montana, around the turn of the century.[2] A special section of the annual Crow Fair parade is now devoted to wearers of the reservation hat and a recent Crow high school graduate requested the hat from his family as a graduation present, suggesting its deep connections to Plains Indian cultural heritage and identity.[3] Because it is difficult to delineate or separate the American Indian and Euro-American components of this hat, one asked how can the hat help us re-think ideas of cultural difference?

The bustle and the reservation hat were two of the objects displayed in "Crossing Cultural Fences: The Intersecting Material World of American Indians and Euro-Americans" at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana.[4] The exhibition focused on the shared histories and material worlds of American Indians and Euro-Americans to confront popular concepts about racial and ethnic distinctions. Most museums represent American Indians in a separate exhibit from the "history" hall, which not only distorts how cultures have interacted with each other, but also perpetuates the myth that "true" Indians inhabit a static, primitive, and archaic way of life. These Indian halls are often filled with richly ornate clothing and crafts with fabulous designs and craftsmanship dating from before the twentieth century, making them extremely popular among museum goers. Yet, ironically, while there is great reverence for these historic Indian artifacts, there is often great prejudice against Indians in the contemporary American West. In their own efforts to assert their cultural identity, however, many American Indians have also perpetuated the image of separateness in exhibitions by focusing on what sets their cultures apart. (The Smithsonian's National Museum of American Indian contains both exhibitions that celebrate distinctly American Indian artifacts, like Plains warrior shirts, and others that incorporate mainstream American objects, such as baseball caps, as symbols of their cultural traditions and ways of life.) Museum displays that highlight a heroic bygone era reflect a paradox common to both

[2] This information was included in the cataloging record for the object, which is number X73.12.03, from the Olga Hannon and MSU School of Art Collection at the Museum of the Rockies, Bozeman, Montana.

[3] Pat Baurlee, a Crow Indian woman living in Bozeman, Montana, told this story about her son during an interview at the museum with the author on 29 June 2005. *NB*: Notes of all interviews cited in this essay are in the author's possession.

[4] The show opened in November 2005 and ran until December 2007. I curated the show with the help of Bill Yellowtail, to whom I would like to give a special thanks for his invaluable contributions.

Figure 1. Entry foyer of "Crossing Cultural Fences" exhibition, which uses objects to encourage visitors to re-examine how they make distinctions between American Indians and non-Indians. Photo by Martin Roffelson, Museum of the Rockies, Bozeman, Montana.

cultures of how to reconcile American Indians' past with the present and how to articulate Indians' place in modern American culture.

As for storytellers, filmmakers, and historians, it has also been difficult for museum curators to chronicle American Indian and Euro-American relations without creating a morality play, narrating the ways one group triumphed over or defeated the other—militarily, biologically, economically, artistically, or even spiritually. Placing American Indians and Euro-Americans on opposite sides of a cultural fence as if they have inhabited worlds completely isolated from each other has caused us to not only lose sight of lines of similarities, but also to distort how Indian communities and individuals participate in and reflect mainstream American ways of life.

Breaking from these traditions, "Crossing Cultural Fences" examined shared experiences, rather than differences, in order to disrupt common stereotypes and to provoke visitors to re-think how they categorize people. The exhibition displayed objects and juxtapositions of objects to prompt people to re-examine their judgments and ideas about cultures and cultural relations, especially ones that pigeonhole American Indians in a two-dimensional stereotype. The point of the show was to highlight the vitality and dynamism of American Indian cultures. Its intention was not to deny the

Figure 2. This case's aim was to upset the popular stereotype that pits cowboys against Indians by showing American Indians' longstanding ranching and rodeo traditions and the adoption of American Indian traditions by non-Indians. Photo by Martin Roffelson, Museum of the Rockies, Bozeman, Montana.

persecution of Indians and the uniqueness of their history and cultures, but to puncture the dichotomy that sets Indians apart in destructive ways. Determining what makes an Indian an Indian is obviously a highly politicized and individual issue.[5] It was the hope that "Crossing Cultural Fences" would be a constructive forum for this debate.

To avoid being didactic, most exhibit labels posed questions (encouraging visitors to examine objects more deeply) with more explanatory text and photographs provided in booklets adjacent to exhibit cases. The twelve sections of the two-thousand-square-foot exhibition covered the late-nineteenth century to the present and mainly incorporated objects from Montana, though the themes and issues permeated cultural relations beyond the Northern Plains and Rockies. Topic selections were based on museum

[5] Works on Indian identity include Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, 2006); MariJo Moore, ed., *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing* (New York, 2003); William S. Penn, ed., *As We Are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity* (Berkeley, 1997).

holdings, questions that had arisen from traditional exhibition displays, and recent scholarship in western history and American Indian studies.[6]

The "Dressed for Success" exhibition case displayed a turn-of-the-century Crow woman's elk tooth dress alongside a Euro-American woman's faux seal fur coat from the same era. This juxtaposition revealed the women's shared responses to over-hunting and to new technologies of the time. (Both replicated scarce animal parts with fake ones, and both garments revealed the use of the personal model sewing machine.) The "Cowboys and Indians?" case recounted the long tradition of Indians working as cowboys and Euro-Americans dressing up as Indians to upset the popular stereotype that cowboys and Indians have been historic adversaries. The "National Park Experiences" case displayed Indian-made souvenirs and an ornate beaded deerskin dress made by Blackfeet women for the wife of a Great Northern railway employee. The objects illustrated the conundrum of pitting Indians and Euro-Americans against each other even within the harsh realities of Indians' disenfranchisement during the founding of national parks. Other themes the exhibition interpreted included hunting, dolls and child's play, religious ties, Indian car culture and the use of Plains Indian motifs to sell cars, and the seemingly inexplicable use of the American flag motif in Plains Indian artifacts during the time of the Indian wars.[7]

Some exhibition displays were more controversial than others. While displaying an elk tooth dress in the same exhibition case as a silk plush coat may have raised some eyebrows among those who believe this type of juxtaposition weakens a sense of Indian cultural integrity, it did not elicit nearly the reaction of placing an eagle feather bonnet alongside a Euro-American woman's bird hat. Each of these two types of feather hats has a rich cultural history, yet rarely have they been discussed together. In fact, the comparison in the exhibit created discomfort in some museum visitors. All that a few of

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[6] Besides Deloria's work, other scholarship that shaped the exhibition's content includes David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York, 2000); Ronald Takaki, "Multiculturalism: Battleground or Meeting Ground?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (November 1993): 109–21; Nancy Shoemaker, *Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York, 2006); Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, eds., *A Companion to American Indian History* (Malden, MA, 2002); National Museum of the American Indian, ed., *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* (Seattle, 2000).

[7] A sampling of the scholarship pertinent to the individual display cases includes Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Norman, 1997); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York, 2000); Louis Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven, 1999); Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (New Haven, 1993); Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *American Indian Quarterly* 24 (Summer 2000): 329–45; Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (particularly the "Dressed for Success" and car culture displays); Toby Herbst and Joel Kopp, *The Flag in American Indian Art* (Seattle, 1993).

the visitors saw in the case was an oppressor and the oppressed, believing that the terrible abuses Indians suffered at the hands and policies of Euro-Americans at the time eclipsed any points of comparison. Nevertheless, setting the two feather hats side by side begged the questions: Are there links between the hats and the people who wore them or only distinctions? What might the pairing tell about shared attitudes towards nature and our own attitudes towards culture?

Figure 3. This case, which paired a Plains Indian man's eagle feather bonnet with a Euro-American woman's bird hat dating from ca. 1900, was the most controversial in the exhibition. Photo by author.

In the late-nineteenth century, both Plains Indians and Euro-Americans highly prized hats made from birds. For Plains Indian men, an eagle feather bonnet was a badge of honor and a mark of his military valor, and such a bonnet continues to be a respected symbol of leadership today.[8] Each feather represents an achievement, and together, the feathers form a crown that embodies a life of mental and physical prowess. Because many American Indians have considered the eagle a powerful and sacred creature, the bonnet itself has been a deeply spiritual object. The owner of the hat in the exhibit was probably from a northern Plains tribe, though his exact identity is unknown. A 1909 photograph of two Blackfeet men greeting Count Folke Bernadotte, the nephew of the King of Sweden, all dressed in full beaded buckskin regalia, including ornate eagle bonnets, documents its ceremonial use beyond the battlefield, and its function as a sign of social prominence and cultural identity.

For Victorian Euro-American women, wearing a hat made of feathers or even a whole bird—like the one in the show—was also a valued personal adornment and a high

[8] Works on eagle feather bonnets include George Horse Capture, *Indian Feathers: Yesterday's Tradition, Today's Care, Tomorrow's Prize* (Cody, 1982); David W. Penney, *Art of the American Indian Frontier: The Chandler-Pohrt Collection* (Seattle, 1994), 215; Sarah Boehme, ed., *Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America* (Seattle, 1998), viii.

status symbol. The hats, like the birds themselves, were a sign of beauty and the height of fashion for upper crust women. Nature-inspired objects were popular in and outside the Euro-American home. They represented good taste in a time when household and personal adornments reflected a woman's values as much as her sense of style. While the bird hat was a prestigious object, instantly communicating a woman of high social standing and the proper sensibilities, it did not inspire the deep religious meanings or embody the sense of personal sacrifice and achievement like the feather bonnet did.

The rage for women's bird hats, however, nearly wiped out many wild bird populations and stirred great criticism for the women who wore them.[9] Wearing the hats became not only bad fashion, but immoral, and women stopped wearing them. Through the formation of local Audubon Society chapters, women led the crusade for bird protection, culminating in the passage of the first wildlife protection laws in the country. In the United States, the sale and use of wild birds and their parts has been banned since 1918. (A specific law protecting eagles dates from 1940.) Even though both types of feathered hats attest to the use of birds as beautiful personal adornments and as markers of high social status, most people today envision them quite differently. While they usually consider the men's headdress a noble expression of human connection to the natural world, they often trivialize the women's hat as an anachronistic exploitation of nature. These divergent attitudes are written into conservation law, which continues to permit Indians to use wild bird feathers in ceremonial regalia, but does not permit non-Indians to do so.[10] The two perspectives on the hats could relate to their differing purposes for ritual and for fashion, popular beliefs in Indians' benign relationships with nature compared to Euro-Americans' beliefs, and perhaps perceptions of gender divisions. On the other hand, the tension aroused by the comparison might reflect unease that these distinctions are not so absolute. Perhaps the people that wore these hats shared ideas about nature, aesthetics, and prestige in ways that many might not first imagine.

Another exhibition case focused on military service and the shared experiences, yet different cultural meanings, of warfare among American Indians and non-Indians. Rather than representing the Indian Wars, the display concentrated on the tradition of Indians fighting with European and American forces. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, within a remarkably short time period, American Indians turned from being fierce adversaries of the U. S. military to fighting with equal determination as full-fledged troops in every branch of the American armed forces. Even before Indians gained U. S. citizenship in 1924, they converted their warrior skills and allegiances to defense of the nation in modern international warfare.

[9] Jennifer Price, "When Women were Women and Birds were Hats," in *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York, 1999).

[10] As noted in George Horse Capture's *Pow Wow*, "American Indians may possess, carry, use, wear, give, loan or exchange among other Indians all federally protected birds." See George Horse Capture, *Pow Wow* (Cody, 1989), 26.

American Indians currently have the highest per capita enlistment rate of any ethnic group in the United States.[11] Military service perpetuates a long-held value of fighting for their homeland and earns high honor and esteem for Indian service men and women within their tribal communities. Economic necessity due to lack of job opportunities on many reservations has also compelled enlistment. Indians have mostly fought in units with non-Indian soldiers, though some separate American Indian units have existed, such as the famous Navajo code talkers from World War II. A series of photographs of four generations of the Walks Over Ice family displayed in the show offered a vivid picture of this long-standing tradition of military service within Plains Indian cultures. Family veterans include Along the Hill Side, who fought with U. S. troops in the Battle of Rosebud a week before the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, his son Albert Iron, who enlisted in the army, where he fought in France as part of the 2nd Infantry during World War I, Iron's son, Cedric Walks Over Ice, who served in the 88th Armored Infantry in World War II, Cedric's brother, Billy Stewart, who served in the Korean War, and Cedric's son, Carson Walks Over Ice, who served in Vietnam for two years, receiving numerous honors, including eleven Silver Stars and two Purple Hearts.[12]

The display illustrated the connections between Indians and Euro-American soldiers through artifacts from the 163rd Infantry Division of the Montana National Guard during World War II. The division was composed of 10 percent American Indians. A captured Japanese flag bearing the signatures of both Euro-American and Indian troops (as well as Jack Benny and Gary Cooper), and a beaded shoulder insignia made by Blackfeet women for *all* members of the division, Euro-American and Indian troops alike, communicated a sense of unity. (The insignia in the exhibit belonged to Dean Thorson, a Euro-American soldier from White Sulphur Springs, Montana.)

Another point made in this "Traditions of Service" display was that while Indians shared the battlefield with non-Indians, many nevertheless interpreted their experiences through their own cultural perspectives. Adhering to long-held cultural traditions, many Indian soldiers have tried to accomplish the four military feats required, for over two hundred years, to become a chief. Achievements include touching an enemy without harming him, stealing an enemy's weapon without harming him, leading a war party, and stealing an enemy's horse. The Crow Elder, Joe Medicine Crow, achieved all four feats while fighting in Europe in World War II, including stealing fifty horses from the German cavalry. Vietnam veteran Carson Walks Over Ice accomplished the first three deeds, but was unable to find and steal an enemy horse in Vietnam. He, therefore, did not qualify to become a chief, even though he did capture four elephants! [13]

[11] Statistic from Red Eye Video Web site for the film "Warriors: Native American Vietnam Vets," www.redeyevideo.org/vietnamvets.html (accessed 6 January 2005).

[12] Information and photographs generously provided by Carson Walks Over Ice.

[13] Carson Walks Over Ice told these stories during an interview with the author at the Crow Agency headquarters in Crow Agency, Montana, September 2005.

A beaded military insignia, a bow and arrow, bird hats, and a pow wow bustle inlaid with a Hollywood glam photo are all material forms of cultural interrelations. By integrating the material worlds of American Indians and Euro-Americans, the exhibition "Crossing Cultural Fences" encouraged the public to re-examine their ideas about cultural differences. Material artifacts are tangible forms of abstract ideas. In the best of circumstances, they articulate ideas more clearly than words alone. When visitors were asked to try to separate the American Indian and Euro-American components of a reservation hat, for example, they often found it perplexing. If they found this process of separation so difficult, then perhaps they might have asked themselves how they were determining their larger judgments of cultural differences.

The object of "Crossing Cultural Fences" was not to persuade visitors that cultural distinctions do not exist, but to break down juxtapositions that actually distort how cultures have interacted. The public is generally inundated with simplistic images that pit American Indians and Euro-Americans against each other, often to the detriment of Native peoples. Focusing on what has bound the cultures together and highlighting the ways they have shared a common landscape and material world is not simply tied to doing balanced history and cultural studies. These issues have significant political and economic ramifications for Indians' rights and opportunities in the world beyond the museum's doors.

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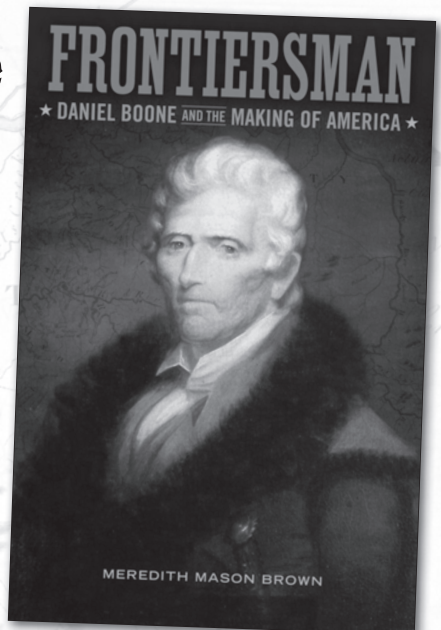

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