

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Winter 2001

Review of *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* By W. Richard West et al.

Russell Thornton

University of California-Los Angeles, rthornto@ucla.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Thornton, Russell, "Review of *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* By W. Richard West et al." (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2282.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2282>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures. By W. Richard West et al. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. Illustrations, appendices, contributors, index. 118 pp. \$25.00

This collection of six papers with an introduction and appendices is drawn from a 1995 symposium convened at the National Museum of the American Indian's George Gustav Heye Center in New York City to examine how "Indians and their cultures have been represented by museums in North America." The authors all have some degree of experience in museums and in the presentation of American Indian exhibits. Some are Native; some are not.

How American Indian cultures have been presented by museums over the years as well as new directions these presentations are taking are difficult tasks to consider in slightly more than a hundred pages. The volume's main focus is on the current practice of giving Native Americans more input into museum exhibits about Native Americans. Authors praise the new direction as embodied, they say, at the national level in the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. This is fine as far as it goes; unfortunately, some authors go little beyond this.

The six chapters plus the introduction and two appendices vary widely in quality. Some are little more than observations or polemics; only four of the nine entries have footnotes. Nevertheless, I found David W. Penney's consideration of "museum representations" to be sharp and scholarly, as is Evan M. Maurer's brief overview. A major failure of the book—and, I assume, of the conference—is the cursory treatment given to such currently important issues as repatriation and traditional care.

Particularly disturbing is the repeated reference to "the authentic Native voice" in Richard West's introduction and to "the Native perspective" in his appendix. There is not a Native "voice" or "perspective," but many of both, as scholars, Indians, and Indian scholars

have shown over the past several decades. One should also be careful applying “authentic” to Indians. There is much diversity within the Native American population, and this diversity should be recognized, considered, appreciated, and presented by our museums.

RUSSELL THORNTON
Department of Anthropology
University of California-Los Angeles