

**Why I Don't Like Museums: A Reply to the
Commentary "Personal, Academic and
Institutional Perspectives on Museums and First
Nations" by Robert R. Janes, published in *The
Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14(1):147-156
(1994)**

Douglas A. West

Department of Political Studies
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, Ontario
Canada, P7B 5E1

When I was a child even the thought of entering a museum made me queasy. I suffered from asthma and museums were incredibly dusty places. I outgrew my affliction but I did not outgrow my distaste for museums. Museums, for me, remain disconnected from living things. I sometimes think of them as analogous to traps that were used during the fur trade. They are holding the things of our culture that have long outlived their usefulness but somehow remain important for our identity.

In recent years, the practise of the museum has changed to meet the demands of a consumer culture, but their basic premise remains the same. As Robert Janes of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary argues, museums and their staffs are "keepers of the collective memory." As such, they are, in my layman's understanding, supposed to collect and curate exhibits that reflect the dynamic elements of culture in any society as well as those that have fallen into disuse. In general, museums seem to have discarded their "tomblike" appearance and have adopted a more lively and spirited position from which to interact with the rest of the world.

The relationship between the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and our museums (I do not say "their") has been a contentious one at best and a colonial one at worst. In his article, "Personal, Academic and Institutional Perspectives on Museums and First Nations", Robert Janes (1994) sets out to engage the reader in a series of reflections about this relationship. In this article, Janes points out the essential problem of the relationship

between museums and Aboriginal peoples in Canada when he argues that,

As a fundamental tenet of the museum profession, the idea of keeping collections forever understandably receives unwavering devotion from most museum workers. The real question, in my view, is whether such a commitment to posterity can be upheld within the context of unrelenting social change. With Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada striving for self-determination and social well-being, what responsibilities do museums have when they own materials which are crucial to fulfilling these aspirations? (*Ibid.*:151).

As a layman in museum terms, my first response to this question is that museums have the responsibility to return to the rightful owners their "cultural property." However, says Janes, it is never that simple. Museums have a responsibility to maintain a connection between a people and their cultural objects, for educational purposes, but perhaps more importantly, for the purpose of reminding people who they are and were. The release of artifacts is a careful process, one that involves identification of the rightful owners and the care of materials. Still, says Janes, this must be accomplished so that both communities can benefit.

Janes provides some clues to how he will affect these changes at the beginning of his article, where he observes that Aboriginal peoples are joining the "citizen's chorus" of Canada (*Ibid.*:148) This is not evident to me. In fact, I observe the situation to be quite the opposite. Indigenous peoples in this country are using their own music, and have created a new chorus, one that perhaps rivals the "citizen chorus".

Another clue to Janes' disposition is found in his description of one of the characteristics of the academic community as the "relentless search for objective knowledge" (*Ibid.*:148). This, along with his observation that "museums conform to a coherent body of method and theory, in order to sustain a high standard of professional practise" (*Ibid.*:153) places Janes squarely "outside" the multitude of Indigenous world views which rarely mention a "coherent body of theory and practise." These are commensurate with the scientific world view, from which Janes cannot detach himself.

The final clues to Janes' disposition come in his description of the North as one of the "world's greatest wildernesses" and the Thelon Game Sanctuary as "exotic." From Indigenous world views, there are no wildernesses at all, just homelands, and Nature is never considered exotic. Wilderness and exotic are Euro-Canadian terms that demand safety as a partner. Perhaps that is what museums really are, houses for safe-keeping and guarding of the secrets of culture. Are these part of Indigenous world views? I think not.

The role of the museum in Canadian society isn't necessarily one of

leadership, as Janes suggests. Is not the museum more of an apologist for empire? Is it a place for "special interest groups" to display their cultures in a multi-cultural universe? Indigenous peoples and First Nations in this country are not interest groups, special or institutional. They are self-determining and sovereign groups of peoples.

Each culture has its own way of "keeping the collective culture." We must remember that the medium of that collection is, as McLuhan argued convincingly, the message. In other words, museums are another element of the scientific world view itself. In spite of Janes' appeal to the progressive liberalization of curator's control of Aboriginal objects, through the creation of advisory bodies and such, the museum remains the central feature of the discussion. The release of artifacts may indeed be a prelude to self-government for Aboriginal peoples, but perhaps there should be an accompanying respect for the abilities of Aboriginal peoples to keep their own collective memories through storytelling and other means, known to them.

Aboriginal peoples in this country have been recognized for their ability to create taxonomies of flora and fauna, to create maps and to pursue complex economic activities, all without the "benefit" of Western knowledge or technology. With this recognition has come the acceptance and promotion of the idea of Aboriginal self-government. But, as Terry Goldie (1989) suggests in *Fear and Temptation*, our *study* of Aboriginal peoples is itself a kind of ideology, one that has "awarded semiotic control to the invaders." Most people agree that in order for this idea of Aboriginal self-government to make sense, it is important to represent and understand the Aboriginal perspective on political and social relationships as well. If, however, Goldie and others are correct, then representations of the Aboriginal view that follow the normal discourse of Canadian politics is a kind of conformity to a set of definitions that are held in the hands of those who can say that the "image of *them* has been *ours*."

In a provocative article entitled "Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes," Gerald Vizenor (1987) reminds us of an American photographer who re-touched his photographs of Aboriginal peoples in order to remove any non-Indian references, such as books and alarm clocks. Vizenor argues that the re-touched photographic images of Aboriginal peoples, which exemplify a process of purification of tribal cultures, have served to transform "mythic time into museum commodities." He goes on to point out that,

The inventions of tribes, and denials of the striptease, however, are not limited to emulsion images. Jingoists, historians, anthropologists, mythologist, and various culture cultists, have hatched and possessed distorted images of tribal cultures. Conference programs and the rich gossip at dinner parties

continue to focus on the most recent adventures in tribal commodities. This obsession with the tribal past is not an innocent collection of arrowheads, not a crude map of public camp sites in sacred places, but rather a statement of academic power and control over tribal images, an excess of facts, data, narrative interviews, template discoveries. Academic evidence is a euphemism for linguistic colonization of oral traditions and popular memories (Vizenor, 1987:181).

What Vizenor suggest, I believe, is that in order to consider the position and validity of Aboriginal peoples, and therefore the position and validity of Aboriginal knowledge, in the context of academic truth, they must perform a reversal of appearance, they must look more and speak more like us.

At times, it sounds as if the problem of the relationship between the museum and First Nations would be resolved if only more First Nations and Aboriginal peoples would see the value of the museum as a method for keeping their collective memory. I will suggest an alternative to this.

Another example of the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples that clearly resembles the position of Native peoples in Canada is that of the Australian Aboriginal in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, which I thought of when Janes spoke of the "citizen's chorus." *The Songlines* is much more than a description of the Aboriginal tradition of "Dreamtime" and the Songlines which criss-cross the entire continent of Australia, it is a studied account of reminiscence.

Chatwin reminds us that "Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, water holes—and so singing the world into existence" (Chatwin, 1987). For the Aboriginal peoples, the earth gives life, food, language and intelligence. And "to wound the earth is to wound yourself, and if others are wounding the earth, then they are wounding you."

Chatwin explains how the Aboriginal is initiated into a specific Songline at birth, and spends the rest of his or her life literally singing the tradition of the land. In this way they know where they belong, they can travel across all of Australia following their Songline from one end to another. When a woman is about to give birth, she goes out onto the land, and when she feels the baby's first kick, its first movement, the spot is marked and the Songline which belongs there becomes the baby's Songline. The memory of the Songline does not require a specific lyric, rather, as Chatwin explains,

Regardless of the words, it seems the melodic contour of the song describes the nature of the land over which the song passes. So, if the Lizard Man were dragging his heels across the salt-pans of Lake Eyre, you could expect a succession of

long flats, like Chopin's "Funeral March". If he were skipping up and down the MacDonnell escarpments, you'd have a series of arpeggios and glissandos, like Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsodies"...An expert songman, by listening to their order of succession, would count how many times his hero crossed a river, or scaled a ridge—and be able to calculate where, and how far along, a Songline he was (*Ibid.*:108).

Chatwin's account of the songlines is reminiscent of Edmund Carpenter's descriptions of the Inuit perceptions of time and space in *Eskimo Realities*. However, Chatwin goes further and juxtaposes the singing quality of the Aboriginal with Western memories of movement and motion. He suggests that the Classical movements of the Gods, described in the Greek and Roman mythologies, "could all be interpreted in terms of totemic geography." I suggest that Chatwin's point was to remind us of our origins as nomadic peoples. This is also the premise, I would argue, for our continual fascination with cultures which do not objectify space and time on a linear progression.

The Songlines is a story about an encounter with another expression of the land, one that has become foreign to the Western world, perhaps exotic. Chatwin's adventure also includes meetings with the representations of how this past has been forgotten. As he travels, he meets missionaries, Marxists and Anthropologists. He also meets a number of "community advisors", one of whom is his guide. The following passage, which recounts a conversation with a community advisor named Kidder, illustrates very pointedly the relationship between Aboriginals and their sacred rites.

"Aboriginals are sick and tired of being snooped at like they were animals in a zoo. They've called a halt."

"Who's called the halt?"

"They have", he said, "And their community advisors."

Kidder, expanding to his theme, said that sacred knowledge was the cultural property of the Aboriginal peoples. All such knowledge which had got into the hands of white men had been acquired either by fraud or force. It was now going to be de-programmed.

"Knowledge is knowledge", I said, "Its not that easy to dispose of."

He did not agree. To de-programme sacred knowledge, he said, meant examining archives for unpublished material on Aboriginals; you then return the relevant pages to the rightful owners. It meant transferring copyright from the author of a

book to the peoples it described; returning photographs to the photographed (or their descendants); recording tapes to the recorded, and so forth (*Ibid.*:43).

The Songlines sets out a radical political agenda which could be employed in Canada. Chatwin privileged his ability to walk with the Australian Aboriginal, to follow his moves without disturbing the path. This is the kind of song that First Nations and other Native peoples in Canada have begun to sing.

References

Chatwin, Bruce

1987 *The Songlines*. New York: Viking Press.

Goldie, Terry

1989 *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Janes, Robert

1994 Personal, Academic and Institutional Perspectives on Museums and First Nations. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14(1):147-156.

Vizenor, Gerald

1987 Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease, pp.180-191, in Calvin Martin (Editor): *The American Indian and the Problem of History*. New York: Oxford University Press.