

Our Lives: Collaboration, Native Voice, and the Making of the National Museum of the American Indian.* Jennifer A. Shannon. Santa Fe, New Mexico: SAR Press, 2014. 288 pp.

Reviewed by David Shorter

Our Lives is part ethnography, part museum exhibit review, partly a historical record, and collectively groundbreaking. No single text elsewhere does all that Jennifer Shannon has accomplished and with such eloquence. Building upon and giving detailed texture to previous scholarship in the museum decolonization movement, Shannon's work extends that conversation and studies both the larger structural matters of exhibiting cultures as well as the face-to-face conversations between indigenous community leaders, curators, museum visitors, and staff members. Shannon spent two years in the field, here meaning the multi-sited engagements of exhibiting and curating culture, where she refined her rich insights into the overlaps and frictions between anthropology and museology. As an adept writer with a sweeping ethnographic attention, Shannon more than achieves her goal of differentiating how museums and Indigenous peoples represent Native cultures; she additionally demonstrates how museums might best be understood as artifacts of negotiations, battles, and perhaps bittersweet concessions.

The breadth of Shannon's book outshines most of the other standards of evaluation deserving the book's praise. Shannon starts with an interesting quandary: what can we make of the role of the curator in an age of bureaucratic flattening at museums, specifically the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and particularly in this moment of critical museology studies? To fully explore the extent of the question, Shannon takes one of the NMAI's inaugural exhibits, "Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities," and examines the multiple processes that go into something called "community curating." The end result is not nearly as fragmented as I predicted, largely due to Shannon's skill as a writer. And while the chapters feel, at points, like they are skirting a particular claim or concealing administrative politics, the subject perhaps calls for such fluidity. Otherwise, I imagine, the book would end up feeling like theory based in gossip.

Shannon brilliantly connects the touchstones of museology, whether the anthropological theorists or the museum directors, and offers her readers a direct view of their positionalities. She enables us to see, for example, why that particular debate in the 1980's was important, or how a decision was made to fund one curatorial decision over another. For anyone who has attempted to curate cultures, her thick descriptions will once again make your jaws tighten and hands clutch. You may, like me, often wish that she were less a referee and more a judge, siding with one perspective over another. Like some of James Clifford's writing (1997), which she reflects upon in various places, Shannon resists choosing sides throughout the book. But to their credit, Shannon exercises a similar type of writing in that she too slides seemingly effortlessly from the ethnographic specific to the large and amorphous theoretical considerations of her subjects.

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Like a jazz composition, this book moves from aspect to aspect of museum management, public relations, collaboration, and long-term work in many Native communities. Her first chapter on her methodological approach and a survey of the field of critical museology proceeds so practically that I immediately knew I would be assigning it to my students. To my surprise, though, I felt the same way after reading each chapter. She starts with the exhibit's build-up and planning; covers the actual exhibit, and in Chapter Three lays out the managerial and bureaucratic structures surrounding the exhibit. For those studying museums and cultural representations, her first three chapters are not tangential: she accurately portrays the seeming impossibility of ethically representing anyone in any form. The book builds considerable momentum in Chapters Four and Five when she studies the central pillars of cross-cultural understanding, expertise and authorship. (These may be the "go to" chapters for our course readers.) And if you are like me and deeply interested in how to rethink the struggle for museum decolonization, her final chapters on "Exhibition," "Reception," and "Reflection" show Shannon's agility as an intellectual, moving from people's opinions on museums, to her own perspectives about how to move collaborative relationships forward between museums and indigenous communities.

This book shines as brightly when the author steps back from the ethnographic details, such as the snapshots of particular people's conversations, and turns to share her own theories. Her short but powerful description of what she thinks museum decolonization means in practice (chapter eight) demonstrates hard-won knowledge, but also a middle ground of sorts. And while the middle ground might not please every reader, such a place holds at least the promise of engagement and shared presence. *Our Lives* succeeds in not just describing that contact zone (a tired but accurate term) as it was forged over the last couple decades at the National Museum of the American Indian, but also in the book's demarcating of a dialectical space. Hence, the book will prove immensely useful in the classroom, whether for undergraduate or graduate students. While the logic behind the inclusion and arrangement of the book's photos is baffling, and the lack of an adjoining digital interface a clearly missed opportunity to present the exhibit more vividly and widely, these faults almost always lie in the gaps between time, money, publishers' blind spots, and legal rights. What matters is that Shannon's writing is clear enough to interest a readership including museum professionals, art collectors, and people interested in representations by and of indigenous peoples. I look forward to assigning the book myself because few other texts will demonstrate so richly and in such fine detail the messiness of collaborative curating and the ethical mandate to continue such work.

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