

***Mediating Knowledges: Origins of a Zuni Tribal Museum.* Gwyneira Issac.
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007. 272 pp.***

Reviewed by Haidy Geismar

This is a careful and considered account of the development of the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center at Zuni in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Introduction, Gwyneira Issac details the circumstances of her own research: how she came to be at Zuni in 1996-97 and the projects that she worked on with the museum. We see very little of Isaac herself within the book, as she gives center field to the key personalities, past and present, that have molded Zuni attitudes to museums, cultural preservation, cultural documentation, and display, and who continue to explore the field of possibilities for self-representation within this complex cultural and political world. Isaac argues that the larger framework for these issues of cultural representation is the negotiation of a bifurcated field of divergent attitudes to knowledge and its transmission. The museum mediates between Indigenous and Anglo-American values, and is also a vessel that contains many of the contradictions at the heart of Pueblo life.

A lengthy historical section discusses the knowledge systems indigenous to Zuni and those of outside visitors, most specifically anthropologists, and even more specifically anthropologists whose work has intersected with museums through the collection and display of cultural practices and artifacts. Anthropology has long been the lens by which Zuni culture has been preserved and displayed, and its legacy as an enterprise that has, in the past, challenged local hierarchies around the dissemination of knowledge remains powerfully present in contemporary Zuni attitudes to the museum. In a poignant vignette, Isaac, describing the museum in 2007, describes a “firsthand account given by a ninety-two-year-old elder who as a child watched large crates being loaded up on wagons and driven out of the Pueblo. He always wondered where they were going and what they contained” (p. 162). Isaac clearly presents the historical and contemporary junctures whereby Anglo-American and Zuni understandings of what is appropriate to be viewed, shared, performed, and documented converge or diverge.

The very concept of a museum becomes the place in which a continual dialogue takes place around what is insider and outsider knowledge, what is Indigenous and what is “Anglo-American,” what is traditional and what is new. The decision of Zuni tribal members to develop a Heritage Center was modeled on the “ecomuseum”—an institution oriented towards the community, rather than being focused on collections and the display of material culture. The term museum was kept in the Center’s name more to attract outside funding than as an institutional charter (p. 104). However, this community enterprise also aimed to create a forum to display the ways in which the community is presented to itself and to outsiders (mainly tourists). This set in place many of the challenges faced by the museum workers who struggle to maintain their connection to local ways of transmitting knowledge as they also innovate to transform them into new museum practices.

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The move away from objects occasionally left the Center's constituents without a visible subject, and often created tensions around what kinds of knowledge should appropriately enter the Center. The presence of tourists and non-Zuni museum workers led some to feel that the museum was not truly part of the community. In turn, the museum itself also institutionalized community engagement and collaboration, and in dealing with artifacts in particular ways reflected Indigenous attitudes towards the presentation of sacred and secret material.

A strong strand of Isaac's discussion delves into how the very technologies of museum practice (which Isaac terms "reproductive technologies") may also provoke awareness of alternative systems of archiving, collecting, preservation, and display. Zuni have been at the forefront of Indigenous groups who reject the visibility that lies at the heart of the modern museum and within contemporary anthropology (as it has devolved into sub-disciplines such as visual anthropology which privileges what can be seen out of culture). Zuni hostility and antipathy towards the photographing, filming, sketching, and collecting by Frank Cushing and other ethnologists working for the Bureau of American Ethnology set an early agenda of resistance towards the appropriation of knowledge into non-indigenous forms. This history has relevance beyond cultural specificity in that it led Zuni leaders to work closely with the Smithsonian Institution on a variety of different research projects—a trajectory that moved them to the forefront of debates around repatriation, and to play an important role in the passing of the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAI) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Despite these tensions, the Center is evidently a place that successfully negotiates the challenge of integrating indigenous values into a space oriented towards a more public/national culture. It is a space of self-determination and the re-narration of history from a tribal perspective. If anything, I would have liked to have more sense of the Center as a place that is now a part of the contemporary fabric of day-to-day life for many people. I wanted to hear more about what happened there on a daily basis, who visited, where they were from, what they thought, and what they did and I would have liked to have seen more lengthy descriptions of the programs, events, activities, and exhibits that were being developed during the period of Isaac's fieldwork.

Despite this lacuna, *Mediating Knowledges* is a sensitive book that gives a balanced discussion of the tensions within tribal museums. It will be useful for anyone interested in theorizing the place, and appropriateness, of museums, ecomuseums, and heritage centers within indigenous communities and for those wishing to understand the local histories of the NMAI and NAGPRA. It is also a welcome contribution to the small number of ethnographies dedicated to a single institution, providing an historical awareness that is so often lacking in accounts of contemporary museum culture and practice.

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