

Crested Butte Museum Exhibit Critique and Redesign Proposal

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Nestled in the heart of Colorado, the Crested Butte Heritage Museum has a mission to preserve, share and celebrate the history and traditions of Crested Butte and Gunnison Valley. Through engaging educational and cultural experiences, the museum connects people to the past, the place, and each other. Within this realm of cultural preservation and historical interpretation, the Crested Butte Museum's exhibits serve as both custodians of the past and architects of contemporary understanding. Despite the institution's steadfast dedication to preserving regional history, a notable deficiency exists in its representation of the indigenous Ute Nation of this mountain region. The current exhibit room lacks a comprehensive narrative that contextualizes Ute culture within the past, present, and future, leaving visitors with a historical narrative that tends to focus on isolated events. The forthcoming analysis will delve into various facets of the current exhibits, examining content curation, interpretive methodologies, and engaging source communities to facilitate cultural change. Drawing upon established museum best practices, this critique seeks not only to pinpoint shortcomings but to celebrate the museum's successes and identify the untapped potential within its walls. Moreover, the subsequent redesign proposal endeavors to seamlessly integrate the past with the present, crafting an immersive and enlightening experience that resonates with diverse audiences, from local residents to international visitors.

Effective museum practices prioritize nuanced storytelling and contextualization to ensure a more accurate and respectful representation of historical events and relationships. Yet, the intricate tapestry woven between the Ute Nation of the region and early pioneers is not fully expressed in current exhibits. As of now, when walking into the large exhibit room visitors are greeted by what the museum's website lists as 'Permanent Exhibits'. These exhibits (see Figure 1) include several dynamic life-sized artifacts on the History of Mountain Biking, a History of Snowsports in Crested Butte, and perhaps the most visually effective exhibit featuring a life-size mine that allows visitors to get a feel of the working conditions early coal miners endured. This detailed display is complete with a tunnel and a surprise that won't be spoiled here. Each of these exhibits features well thought out panels sharing the regions social

values that have shaped their communities. The artifacts are plentiful, well placed and engage visitors to walk around and explore the space. Additionally, it can be difficult to fill such a vast space and transition into different topics all in the same room. The Crested Butte Museum has created a seamless flow that shares the same 'voice' between the permanent exhibits.



Figure 1

As visitors transition to the left side of the room, there is a noticeable disruption in the museum's cohesive narrative. This break is particularly significant as the exhibit explores the intersection of Manifest Destiny and the history of the indigenous Ute Nation in the region, intensifying the detrimental impact of the disjointed presentation. It is here this critique stems, my hope is to advance the museum's mission and strengthen its impact as a dynamic educational resource through a critical evaluation of this exhibit. By aspiring to identify areas for improvement and present a thoughtful redesign proposal aimed at contributing to the ongoing narrative of Crested Butte, and hopefully foster a deeper appreciation for its native heritage. This involves not only seamlessly continuing the narrative from the right side of the room but also integrating the Ute perspective across historical periods and present a future narrative for the Ute Nation that directly connects to the Gunnison Valley.

Currently the exhibit (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) presents the Ute nation in a static setting and only in Euro- American situations of western expansion. It brings to mind Michael Blakey's critique of the Natural History Museum and their contextualization of 'nature', "By association, Native Americans become part of that vast wilderness 'tamed' in the name of 'America' expansion or 'progress'... Since a major function of museums and reconstructions is to socialize the public, the ideological content of their message has an especially pronounced impact."¹ Here, the Crested Butte Museum's exhibit lacks a cohesive presentation of the Ute Nation's cultural evolution over time, particularly in relation to the regional history of Crested Butte. Moreover, there is a conspicuous absence of exhibit material that effectively bridge the gap between the Ute Nation's rich historical legacy and its contemporary presence, thereby omitting vital connections to the Ute Nation's ongoing cultural contributions and aspirations for the future in the Gunnison Valley. Paired with outdated wording such as 'Indian,' accurate labels explaining what pictures visitor are looking in context to the topics presented, the lack of a linear timeline depicting the past of the Ute Nation to present day, and the general lack of exhibit effort made in comparison to the other side of the room, the exhibit is failing to be a mindful moral educator.

In his book *Reflections of a Culture Broker*, Richard Kurin aptly points out that "Culture is a rich but problematic concept."² For museum professionals, the intricate process of representing peoples and cultures, as suggested by Kurin, is both nuanced and complex. Notably, the exhibit under consideration currently has a label acknowledging with gratitude some source community members who contributed

¹ Blakey, Michael. 1994. "American nationality and ethnicity in the depicted past." In *politics of the Past. Vol. 12.*, by P. W. and David Lowenthal. Gathercole, 28-48. London; New York: Routledge.

² Kurin, Richard. 1997. *Reflections of a Culture Broker, A View from the Smithsonian*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

to its existing narrative on display. While certain labels shed light on how the Ute people recall historical events like the Brunot Agreement of 1873, some aspects fall short. For instance, the photograph (See Figure 2, bottom right and Figure 4) accompanying said label features four unidentified white men seated between two rows of Ute people all lack names and context, leaving visitors to assume these are the participants of the 1873 agreement. Which man was the Chief? Who or what authority are the white men? After trying to identify these individuals, a very simple search provided the exact picture and the name of each person. Why are these names and context omitted in the exhibit? One can only assume the omission is due to the anthropological specimens they present without names. Again, they are presented as static and from a Euro-American perspective of how this event led to mining in the region. Nothing about the 3.7 million acres given up by the Ute due to Chief Ouray's desire for peace, or how this 'agreement' was not a 'treaty' because the government no longer recognized Indigenous peoples as sovereign nations in 1871. Adding these nuances into exhibit content elevates this topic into a rich complex history. As another example, the only mention of the Ute Nation in the present tense is limited to three sentences, accompanied by an old photograph that inadvertently perpetuates an 'Indian Rhetoric,' depicting the Ute Nation surrounded by teepees and as isolated specimens of a nonlinear society. No narrative on their descendants in the region (or how the Ute Nation was force-marched to Utah in 1881) or contemporary Ute community photographs. A grave missed opportunity to meet the museum's mission of connecting people and offering education of the past.

The proposed redesign, featuring a Ute Nation Exhibit at the Crested Butte Heritage Museum, is grounded in a commitment to cultivating an inclusive and authentic portrayal of the Ute people's history. Drawing inspiration from James Clifford's concept of a 'contact zone,' where a museum becomes, "...the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. Unlike the term "frontier," which is grounded within a

European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe), the expression 'contact zone' is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctors and whose trajectories now intersect."³ When museums are seen as contact zones, a moral relationship of power is exchanged between simply representing history to acting on behalf of the historic community. "Too long has differences of power, control and design of budgets determined who would be the collectors and who the collected."⁴

The primary aim of this redesign is to empower Indigenous voices and provide the Ute Nation the agency to reclaim their narrative. The following are suggestions built from museum best practices, and case studies in anthropological interpretation of First Peoples, together the developing framework will help the Crested Butte Museum meet their mission to connect people through thoughtful cultural experiences of the region.

Empowering Indigenous Voices:

The overarching goal of this redesign is to empower Indigenous voices and provide the Ute Nation with the agency to reclaim their narrative. By transferring curatorial authority, we acknowledge the Ute community's right to control how their history is presented. This transformative approach aligns with contemporary best practice principles that emphasize inclusivity, decolonization, and foster mutual respect between museums and the source communities they represent. As case studies have shown, such as Anita Herle's work with Canadian Task Force charged with developing an ethical framework for Aboriginal nations to represent their history and culture in concert with cultural institutions,

³ Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: Harvard University Press.

⁴ Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: Harvard University Press.

demonstrate that "...participation in the in the interpretation and presentation of their own culture can be a crucial aspect of cultural regeneration."⁵

Moreover, inspecting Peer's and Brown's critical examination, as expressed in *Museums and Source Communities*, prompts us to reevaluate the traditional roles of museum professionals as representatives of communities. While conventional interpretation methods involve presenting concepts and stories in a linear timeline, many Indigenous groups teach through stories that stress the interconnected relationships of all things in Creation. Exhibits curated within the cultural authority of the Ute Nation may adopt "a series of non-linear themes and concepts, and repetition needs to be accepted."⁶ Though this is but one example, embracing these types of alternative approaches fosters a more authentic and culturally resonant representation that by its authentic nature subtracts the Euro-American or western academic modes of interpretation currently exhibited.

Confronting Unpleasant Truths:

A fundamental tenet of this proposal is the commitment to truth-telling. Following the principle that museums should not gloss over uncomfortable realities, the redesigned exhibit will address historical events, such as the Brunot Agreement of 1873, with utmost transparency. Unpleasant truths will be presented with sensitivity, acknowledging the impact of western expansion on the Ute Nation from a Ute perspective, and thus fostering a space for reflection and dialogue. An excellent way to engage the educational component to the museum's mission.

As of now, the exhibit seems to gloss over the impact of western expansion to the Ute Nation. Sections that do mention reservations or treaties only provide interpretation from a western view. This

⁵ Herle, Anita. 1994. "Museums and First Peoples in Canada." *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 39-66.

⁶ Brown, Laura Peers and Alison K. 2003. *Museums and Source Communities*. London and New York: Routledge.

would be a great topic to offer oral histories, or video accounts incorporated into the exhibit space as it adds a “voice” and personal aspects to the narrative. Perhaps a descendant of a source community member from the Ute Nation of the time would help to personalize these impactful stories to present day people.

Questioning Representations in Western Academic Modes:

Because the current exhibit panels present several instances of Euro-American perspectives, a closer look at Peer's and Brown's critical examination may be especially helpful in navigating source community members who have a cross-cultural identity of American and being of Ute descent. “Bringing source community members into museums turns these ordinary dominant-society institutions into arenas for multiculturalism, debate and learning, ...this can lead to extraordinary exchanges of knowledge as well as opportunities for people from all walks of life to begin to understand the views of someone from another cultural group.”⁷ Here the authors also warn when museum’s engage with source communities, “...museum staff, on the basis of professional knowledge and authority, control exhibition content... However, it should involve learning from source community representatives what they consider appropriate to communicate or to display...and implementing those desires and suggestions.”⁸ The writers also suggest artifacts themselves can be seen as ‘contact zones’ in the same concept mentioned above by Clifford. They stress that artifacts prompt a re-learning of forgotten knowledge and provide opportunities to piece together fragmented narratives. Recognizing these connections between communities, images, and artifacts will allow museum professionals to be aware of the ways in which museums are expressions of Western culture. Often museum staff find that being educated by

⁷ Brown, Laura Peers and Alison K. 2003. *Museums and Source Communities*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁸ Brown, Laura Peers and Alison K. 2003. *Museums and Source Communities*. London and New York: Routledge.

community members, “They begin to see in a new light the assumptions embedded in traditional museum training and become open to alternative ways of doing things.”⁹

Presenting a Living Identity:

By entrusting Indigenous individuals with the responsibility of shaping the narrative and curation of their own history, the museum acknowledges the dynamic and ongoing nature of their cultural identity. This shift in authority transcends a mere acknowledgment of historical events; it actively affirms that the Indigenous community is a living, evolving entity with agency over how their story is told. In doing so, the museum recognizes and respects the resilience, contributions, and contemporary significance of the source community, fostering a space where their cultural heritage is not consigned to the past but is instead a vital and integral part of the present and future.

In conclusion, a museum is always part of the larger social force in the world. The proposed redesign for the Ute Nation Exhibit at the Crested Butte Heritage Museum seeks to not only address the existing deficiencies but also fundamentally transform the museum into a dynamic educational space that resonates with its mission. By drawing inspiration from James Clifford's 'contact zone' concept and acknowledging the museum's role as a space of ongoing relations and encounters, this initiative aims to empower Indigenous voices and shift curatorial authority to the Ute Nation. Confronting unpleasant truths, presenting a living identity, and questioning representations in Western academic modes are integral components of this framework. Through a collaborative effort with source community members, the exhibit will transcend the limitations of a static display, offering a nuanced, authentic, and respectful portrayal of the Ute Nation's history. This redesign is not merely about correcting historical inaccuracies; it's about fostering a space for reflection, dialogue, and appreciation for the ongoing contributions and

⁹ Brown, Laura Peers and Alison K. 2003. *Museums and Source Communities*. London and New York: Routledge.

aspirations of the Ute Nation within the Gunnison Valley. As museums continue to evolve, it is imperative that they become more than custodians of the past; they must become platforms for diverse voices, ensuring that the rich tapestry of history is woven with authenticity, sensitivity, and mutual respect.

Listed below are possible tribal council members for source community engagement:

- The Southern Ute Indian Tribe. Southern Ute Reservation, Colorado. <https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/>
- Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum. Ignacio Colorado. <https://www.southernutemuseum.org/>
- Ute Mountain Tribal Preservation Office. <https://www.utemountainutetribe.com/cultural%20preservation%20THPO.html>
- The Uintah and Ouray reservation in Northeastern Utah.

Phone Number: (435) 722-5141, Mailing Address: P.O. Box 190, Fort Duchesne UT 84026



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Ouray and subchiefs, 1873

Ute Indians and agents in Washington, DC after conclusion of the 1873 Brunot Agreement. Front row, left to right: Guero, Chipeta, Ouray, and Pia; second row: Uriah M. Curtis, James B. Thompson, Charles Adams, and Otto Mears; back row: Washington, Susan (Ouray's sister), Johnson, Jack, and John.

(As sourced from coloradoencyclopedia.org)

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