

“Infinite Thousands”: The National Museum of the American Indian’s “Invasion Wall” and the Burkean Pentad



Photo credit: Nathan Grumbine Photography

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Introduction

On September 21, 2004, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., making it the eighteenth Smithsonian museum.¹ The museum combined artifacts from the Gustave Heye Center in New York City and the Maryland-based Cultural Research Center, along with a theatre and performing arts program,² interactive exhibits partially arranged by native peoples, videos, outdoor landscaping, and even a cafeteria serving native-style foods. Some praised the museum for consulting and collaborating with American Indian communities,³ for its outside design featuring four indigenous habitats,⁴ and for its strategic location on the National Mall.⁵ As Amanda Cobb notes, “the NMAI both symbolically and physically reclaims Washington, D.C. as Indian Country.”⁶

According to their mission statement, the NMAI “is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere – past, present, and future – through partnership with Native people and others.”⁷ Created in response to the National Museum of the American Indian Act, the museum seeks to both empower Native people and to educate non-Native people about the “cultural legacy, historic grandeur, and contemporary culture of Native Americans.”⁸ As NMAI Director Kevin Gover states on the NMAI website, the museum’s “objective is no less than to change what the world knows about the Native peoples of the Americas and Hawaii.”⁹ Museum visitors include both Native people and non-Native people from all over the United States and the world, and the museum seeks to create exhibits that both Native and non-native people will find enlightening. In order to so, the museum’s exhibits were designed through collaboration with American Indian communities.

Because the museum was created through this collaborative effort, it uses space in a way that is very different from what is commonly seen in most museums. Each exhibition is curvilinear, having a center display and several curved community-created displays surrounding it. For example, in the

“Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World” exhibit, eight American Indian communities are represented, each with its own curvilinear display. Cobb notes that many of the stories told through these communal displays lack clear beginnings, middles and ends.¹⁰ While this use of space more accurately represents American Indian cultures, it may confuse some visitors.

A number of scholars have criticized the museum for its content and presentation. Historian Steven Conn argues that the museum focuses too much on heritage and not enough on history, noting that it is “sometimes confusing, sometimes incoherent, and ultimately disappointing.”¹¹ He observes that the artifacts from the Heye Center are largely unidentified, and suggests that the museum contains far too many flat screen monitors displaying information and not enough artifacts. Though she praises the museum for its non-traditional, non-linear use of space, Melissa Nelson also acknowledges that some visitors may find this use of space “too demanding,”¹² noting that many visitors she observed “mentioned that they were confused, disoriented, and did not find what they expected.”¹³ Sonya

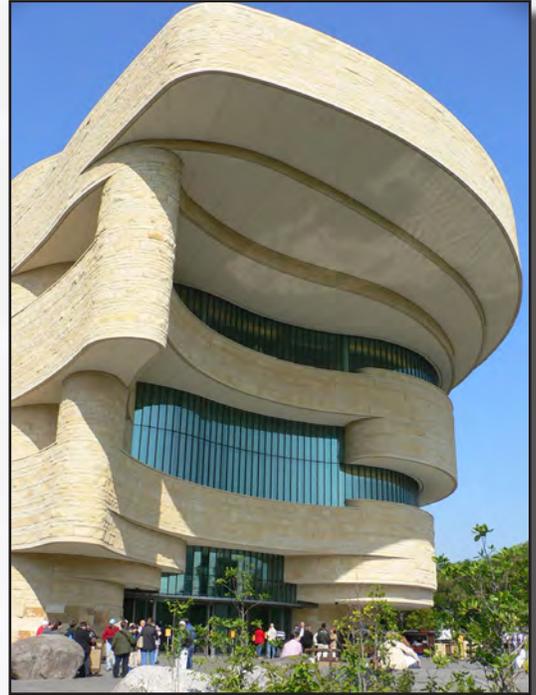


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Atalay suggests that the museum does not highlight native resistance to European invasion to the extent that it should.¹⁴ She argues that there is not enough of a sense of struggle in the exhibitions in the museum, which contributes to visitors misunderstanding the notion of survivance, a term coined by Gerald Vizenor meaning “an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.”¹⁵ Myla Vicenti Carpio criticized the museum for its lack of historical focus.¹⁶ She argues that “by not providing visitors with more context or information about what they are viewing, the museum perpetuates long-standing distortions of Indigenous peoples.”¹⁷ Similarly, Amy Lonetree notes that, although the museum offers important messages about American Indian cultures, there is also a danger in the implicit way that the messages are conveyed.¹⁸ She is concerned that they may be misinterpreted by visitors who may “recast” such messages through their own stereotypical narrative lenses.¹⁹

This article examines one such message in the museum: The spread of disease due to the European invasion as was illustrated through the Invasion Wall in the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit. Iris Hahn-Santoro explains that this exhibit “concentrate[d] on the last 500 years of Native history and how contact with the new settlers changed their lives,” and “present[ed] insights and views of the Native Americans who relate and describe these historical events.”²⁰ The Invasion Wall was one part of this exhibit. Upon entering the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit, visitors encountered two walls: To the right was an evidence wall featuring a variety of American Indian artifacts from a number of different tribes; to the left was the Invasion Wall. The exhibit was shaped like a cyclone, with the Invasion Wall as one of the outmost layers. The Invasion Wall contained a map of the Americas etched in glass with places and dates written in black, and drawings, which were made to look like ancient cave drawings, corresponding with each place and date. In chronological order of when outbreaks occurred, different sections of the map illuminated in red. While the locations on the map appeared in red, the names of the places and dates of the outbreaks lit up in white. Each component remained lit while other components illuminated. Ultimately, the entire map was illuminated.



Through rhetorical analysis, this article applies Burkean pentadic ratios to the wall, suggesting that the National Museum of the American Indian’s Invasion Wall employed a scene-act pentadic ratio, placing emphasis on the act of spreading disease and on the locations to which disease spread. This analysis suggests that if a different ratio, such as act-agent or agent-purpose, had been applied instead, the Invasion Wall may have made a stronger, more accurate historical statement, but it would have done so at the risk of alienating some visitors and at the risk of jeopardizing the exhibit’s and the museum’s purpose.



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Museums and their exhibits serve to contribute to the creation of a collective or public memory.²¹ As museum studies scholar Helena Robinson observes, “museums have a special ability to use collections to produce meanings and histories.”²² Rhetoric scholars Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott note that public memory suggests that “beliefs about the past are shared among members of a group, whether a local community or the citizens of a nation state.”²³ They observe six “assumptions” about public memory: 1) It is “activated by present concerns, issues or anxieties,” 2) It “narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging,” 3) it is “animated by affect,” thus creating emotional ties, 4) it is “partial, partisan, and thus often contested,” 5) it relies on both material and symbolic or rhetorical supports, and 6) it “has a history.”²⁴ It was with these assumptions in mind that this analysis has been conducted.

It should be noted that the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit closed in January 2014, after being a permanent fixture

in the NMAI for almost ten years. Its lengthy tenure suggests that it was an exhibit that embodied the mission of museum well, making it a rhetorical text worthy of examination. Because the museum's purpose is twofold, NMAI exhibits must simultaneously empower Native people and educate non-Native people about American Indian cultures. Through this analysis, I seek to show how the Invasion Wall, as part of the "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories" Exhibit, accomplished this mission and thus contributed to the creation of public memory.

Kenneth Burke and the Dramatic Pentad

In *On Symbols and Society*, Kenneth Burke explains that dramatism is "a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions."²⁵ In order to conduct such an analysis, Burke suggests that one study five components of a situation: Act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. Burke defines act as "what took place, in thought or deed," scene as "the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred," agent as "what person or kind of person performed the act," agency as "what means or instruments [the agent] used," and purpose as "why."²⁶ Perhaps more succinctly, in his introduction to *On Symbols and Society*, Gusfield defines the terms as follows:

- Act: What took place?
- Scene: What is the context in which it occurred?
- Agent: Who performed the act?
- Agency: How was it done?
- Purpose: Why was it done?²⁷

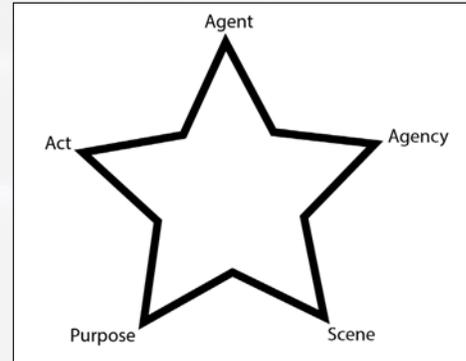


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Collectively, these components form the dramatic pentad, which Vito Signorile explains is an "entré into the detailed analysis of the myriad of factors at work in [a] social framework."²⁸ Specifically, Burke intended for the pentad to serve as a tool for rhetorical critics to analyze motivation. It was designed to be used as a "generating principle" that "provides us with a kind of simplicity that can be developed into considerable complexity, and yet can be discovered beneath its elaboration."²⁹ In fact, Crable suggests that when one reads the pentad in conjunction with Burke's representative anecdote, one can conclude that Burke's method is "the most complete approach to the study of motives."³⁰ Nelson explains that "the pentad itself simultaneously provides for an analysis of the terminological constitution of actions and for the dissolution of actions into terms."³¹ In a 1978 essay in *College Composition and Communication*, Burke notes that "the pentad in effect is telling the writer what to ask."³² Rather than a tool for producing a text, the pentad was created with the intention of helping a critic "perceive what was going on in a text that was already written."³³ As Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp explain, "the pentad enables the critic first to name the elements involved in the act and then investigate the relationship among those elements."³⁴ Because of its usefulness as an analysis tool,³⁵ many scholars have used the pentad as a lens to study a myriad of rhetorical texts.³⁶

The five components of the pentad can pair together to

form ratios, or “relationships between parts of the pentad.”³⁷ Ratios allow for different meanings to be conveyed.³⁸ As Burke explains in his *Grammar of Motives*, “ratios are principles of determination”³⁹ – in essence, they are what drives a story. Burke explains that “ratios are used sometimes to explain an act and sometimes to justify it.”⁴⁰ Different ratios may be applied to the same story to produce different meanings.⁴¹ For example, an act-agent ratio “more strongly suggests a temporal or sequential relationship than a purely positional or geometric one,”⁴² which might be obtained through a different ratio. Burke advocates that “ratios may often be interpreted as principles of selectivity rather than as thoroughly causal relationships.”⁴³

As Glenn & Enoch observe, these ratios can “leak” into one another.⁴⁴ There is some ambiguity between components of the pentad, as well as between ratios. More than one ratio may be used to interpret a single rhetorical text. For example, one scholar may understand a text to be driven by an agent-purpose ratio, while another scholar may believe that the same text is dominated by a scene-act ratio. These differing lenses often lead to differing rhetorical conclusions about the text. Underwood explains that this ambiguity is a result of the uncertainty and flexibility of language.⁴⁵ Burke states that “since no two things or acts or situations are exactly alike, you cannot apply the same term to both of them without thereby introducing a certain margin of ambiguity.”⁴⁶ This analysis of the Invasion Wall portion of the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit has been conducted with this ambiguity in mind.

Analysis of the Invasion Wall

As previously mentioned, the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit was shaped like a cyclone, with the Invasion Wall as one of the outermost layers. The cyclone shape implied that American

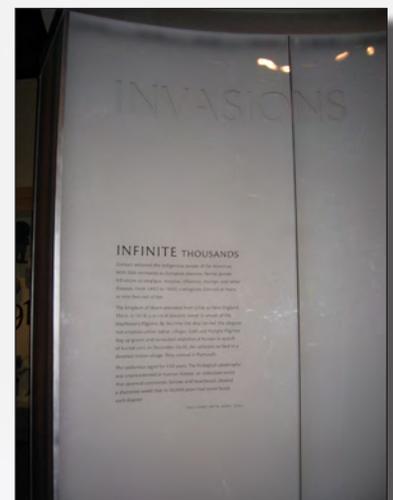


Indian history had encountered varying levels of destruction, and just as a hurricane’s outer layers are the most destructive, the European invasion was one of the most destructive forces in American Indian history. The Invasion Wall was made of glass and featured the word “INVASIONS” in all capital letters etched at the top left corner of the wall. Further down the panel was the subtitle “INFINITE THOUSANDS,” which was also written in all capital letters, with the word “INFINITE” in larger font than the word “THOUSANDS.” The change in font size added meaning to the oxymoronic phrase: While something cannot be both infinite and numerical simultaneously, the change in font in the subtitle drew visitors to emphasize the former part of the phrase. The word

“INFINITE” communicated the severity of the situation. This subtitle was followed by a quotation from Comanche author and curator Paul Chaat Smith that read,

“Contact withered the indigenous people of the Americas. With little immunity to European diseases, Native people fell victim to smallpox, measles, influenza, mumps and other diseases. From 1492 to 1650, contagions claimed as many as nine lives out of ten. The kingdom of death extended from Chile to New England. There, in 1616, a wave of diseases swept ahead of the Mayflower’s Pilgrims. By the time the ship landed, the plagues had emptied entire Indian villages. Cold and hungry Pilgrims dug up graves and ransacked abandoned houses in search of buried corn. In December 1620, the colonists settled in a deserted Indian village. They named it Plymouth.

The epidemics raged for 150 years. The biological catastrophe was unprecedented in human history: an extinction event that spanned continents. Sorrow and heartbreak cloaked a shattered world that in 10,000 years had never faced such a disaster.”



Smith's quotation set the stage for the Invasion Wall to be interpreted through a Burkean scene-act ratio. Signorile explains that "an act can require a particular scene insofar as that scene is appropriate to that specific act."⁴⁷ By giving a geographic location of "the kingdom of death," Smith's quotation emphasized both the scene and the act that occurred there. The imagery in the quotation also emphasized the scene and centered on the destruction that took place in New England. Furthermore, the use of passive voice in this quotation suggested a scene-act ratio, rather than an agent-act ratio. While active voice gives agency, passive voice suggests that something merely happened, rather than placing blame, responsibility or praise on any one individual, group, or force. When active voice was used in Smith's quotation, the agency was placed on disease, rather than on the people who brought disease to the Americas.

The quotation also included imagery that emphasized the severity of the situation. The first sentence used the word "withered" to illustrate the devastating effect that European contact had on American Indian populations. Since only organic things, such as plants and flowers can wither, the word "wither" invited museum visitors to envision "the indigenous people of the Americas" as organic beings who thrived until the arrival of Europeans. Imagery also appeared in the phrase "a wave of diseases swept ahead of the Mayflower's Pilgrims." The phrase suggested a nautical theme, which is appropriate considering that Europeans travelled across the ocean to the Americas. Furthermore, the phrase "a wave of diseases"



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connected to the cyclone-like shape of the "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories" Exhibit. Like cyclones, waves can be destructive forces. In fact, cyclones may cause waves; in this case, the cyclone of European contact caused the devastating "wave of diseases" that resulted in the death of "infinite thousands." The final paragraph of the quotation was riddled with imagery, using words such as "raged," "catastrophe," "unprecedented," "extinction," "sorrow," "heartbreak" and "shattered." Each of these words illustrated the relentlessness and severity of the spread of disease.

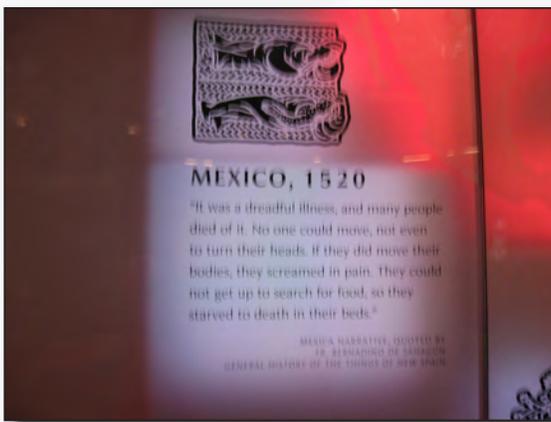
Historical data, narratives, and statistics provided emphasis to the severity of the situation as well. The statistic that "from 1492 to 1650, contagions claimed as many as nine lives out of ten" may have both shocked visitors and allowed them to understand the severity of the devastation. The narrative concerning how the Pilgrims searched for buried corn conveyed the desperation of the situation. Finally, the combined use of the numbers 150 and 10,000 emphasized the severity of the situation by showing visitors that in such a short period of time, a world that was relatively untouched for thousands of years was destroyed by disease. Each of these statistics focused on the effects of the spread of disease; in other words, they were dominated by the "act" element of the pentad.



To the right of the quotation was a map of the Americas etched in glass with places and dates which illuminated in red and white, as described in the introduction of this article. The map, drawings and quotations served to emphasize the scene-act ratio. Burke notes that the scene-act ratio is "in the fullest sense positive (or 'positional')," meaning that the act requires the scene to "contain" it.⁴⁸ The Invasion Wall map, symbolizing scene, served as a vessel "containing" the drawings and quotations that represent and describe the act of

the spread of disease.

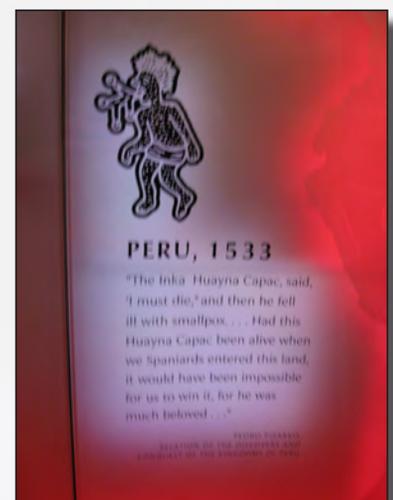
The first section of the map to light up was the Caribbean Islands. While the islands on the map appeared in red, an image and its corresponding explanation appeared in white. The image was of a spotted king on a throne holding his crown away from him, and the writing read, “Caribbean, 1493. ‘There occurred an epidemic of smallpox so virulent that it left Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Cuba desolated of Indians...’ - Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdez, ‘Natural History of the West Indies.’” According to the Mariner’s Museum website, Oviedo was a scholar and historian for Spanish royalty during the end of the 13th century and beginning of the 14th century.⁴⁹ Because of Oviedo’s connection to the Spanish crown, it is likely that the use of passive voice, which eliminates agency and consequently responsibility, was used in this quotation to explain the situation without suggesting that Europeans were responsible for the spread of the smallpox epidemic. Indeed, during that time period, it is unlikely that Oviedo would have understood that disease could be spread in such a way. Nevertheless, the choice of this quote, rather than another, perhaps more modern quotation, focused on the act of destruction by disease and the scene in which it occurred, rather than on agent, agency, or purpose.



The second area on the map to illuminate was Mexico. The corresponding writing read, “Mexico, 1520. ‘It was a dreadful illness, and many people died of it. No one could move, not even to turn their heads. If they did move, their bodies screamed in pain. They could not get up to search for food, so they starved to death in their beds.’ - Mexica narrative, quoted by Fr. Bernadina de Sabagún, ‘General History of the Things of New Spain.’” Just above the quotation was an image of two people, covered in spots, lying in adjacent beds. This image served to illustrate the intense description that Bernadina de Sabagún provided. Bernadina de Sabagún, a Franciscan missionary who spent most of his life in Mexico,⁵⁰ did much anthropological writing, which is very

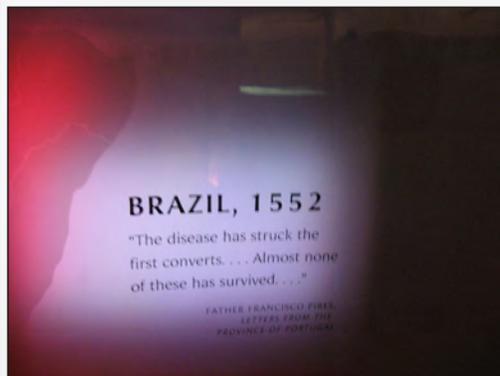
descriptive in nature. The imagery, illustrated through the descriptive language in Bernadina de Sabagún’s anthropological text and through the image of the two people lying in beds, focused on the act of disease, rather than on any other element of the pentad. This is likely due to Bernadina de Sabagún’s anthropological purpose; he was seeking to describe the situation, rather than passing judgment on motives or agents. Because the language was so descriptive, it may have served as a pathos appeal,⁵¹ which may have caused museum visitors to feel sorrow at the thought of such devastation. As Dickinson, Blair, and Ott state in their book *Places of Public Memory*, public memory is “animated by affect.”⁵² The descriptive language may have triggered similar emotions in museum visitors, thus contributing to the exhibit’s public memory.

The third section of the map to light up was Peru. As Peru illuminated, visitors encountered an image of a person with spots who is either coughing or speaking, and a narrative that read, “Peru, 1533. ‘The Inka Huayna Capac said, ‘I must die,’ and then he fell ill with smallpox... Had this Huayna Capac been alive when we Spaniards entered this land, it would have been impossible for us to win it, for he was much beloved...’ - Pedro Pizarro, ‘Relation to the Discovery and Conquest of the Kingdom of Peru.’” Pizarro, a self-proclaimed “conqueror and settler” of the “Kingdom of Peru,”⁵³ was “one of the earliest writers on Peru.”⁵⁴ Pedro Pizarro came on the expedition to Peru with his cousin, Francisco Pizarro, to whom he served as a page.⁵⁵ Pedro Pizarro, who was trained in the military,⁵⁶ provided a first-hand account of military events occurring in Peru during the 16th century, albeit through a pro-Spanish-conquest biased lens. Because of his loyalty to Spanish conquest, the quote from his writing eliminated any inkling of



agency, focusing instead on Huayna Capac as a victim of the smallpox epidemic, rather than as a victim of Spanish conquest. This, in effect, focused the Peru section of the Invasion Wall on act, rather than agent or agency.

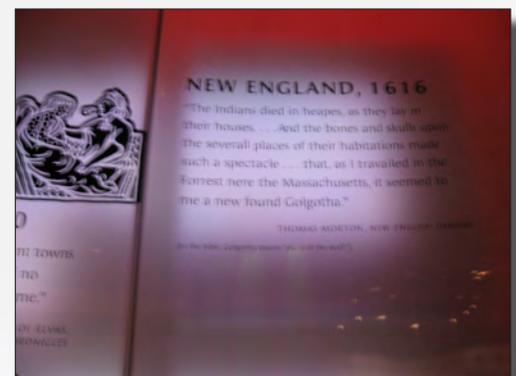
The fourth illuminated section of the map was the southeastern section of the United States. Next to it was writing that read, “American Southeast, 1540. ‘About this place... were large vacant towns grown up in grass that appeared as if no people had lived in them for a long time.’ - The Gentleman of Elvas, ‘The DeSoto Chronicles.’” Unlike the previous three examples, no image accompanied the writing. The lack of image was fitting, because the words of The Gentleman of Elvas, who was presumably one of eight volunteers from Elvas who became members of Hernando de Soto’s expedition to what is now the southern United States,⁵⁷ emphasized vast nothingness. Though the quotation did not explicitly state that the towns were vacant because of the population died of disease, visitors could infer from the other parts of the exhibit what The Gentleman of Elvas was suggesting. The emptiness implied from the writing and the lack of image suggested the severity of the spread of disease at this time in what is now the southeastern United States. Again, this section of the Invasion Wall focused on act and scene – mass death caused by disease in the southeastern United States – rather than on other elements of the pentad.



Similar to the fourth illuminated section, the fifth section, Brazil, also contained no image. A quotation read, “Brazil, 1552. ‘The disease has struck the first converts... Almost none of these has survived...’ - Father Francisco Pires, ‘Letters from the Province of Portugal.’” Pires was a Jesuit priest who sought to convert American Indians in Brazil to Christianity.⁵⁸ Metcalf notes that it is likely that Pires and his fellow Jesuits “carried the disease along the coast of Brazil in 1552 and 1553, and introduced it into São Vicente, where by 1554 a major epidemic raged among the recently converted Indians of Piratininga.”⁵⁹ Like the previous section on the southeastern United States, this section on Brazil emphasized the severity of disease, which resulted in the death of

so many that almost no one was left. By choosing this quotation, which focused on the destructive effects of disease - a quotation from a Jesuit priest who likely was unintentionally responsible for the outbreak - the Invasion Wall curators allowed this part of the Invasion Wall, like other sections before it, to emphasize act over agency, agent, or purpose. Scene was also prevalent because of the map and the reference to Brazil. This highlighted the scene-act ratio that occurred so often with the Invasion Wall.

The final section of the map to illuminate was the northeastern United States. Next to it was an image of a spotted person sitting with a spotted person; presumably, the image depicted a well person caring for someone who is ill. The writing, which was the only statement that was not translated from Spanish and included Middle English spellings, read, “New England, 1616. ‘The Indians died in heapes, as they lay in their houses... And the bones and skulls upon the several places of their habitations made such a spectacle... that, as I travailed in the Forrest nere the Massachusetts, it seemed to me a new found Golgotha.’ - Thomas Morton, ‘New English Canaan’ [In the bible, Golgotha means place of the skull].” Morton was a New England colonist who



wrote about his “ten years knowledge and experience” in North America.⁶⁰ Morton’s *New English Canaan* has been referred to as “a promotional tract with delusions of literary grandeur.”⁶¹ It is interesting that the curators chose a quotation from Morton, rather than one from one of the more straightforward writers of the time and place, such as John Smith or perhaps Roger Williams. Morton’s writing provided intense if ostentatious imagery that other works may not have included. Like Bernadina de Sabagún’s writing about Mexico, Morton’s writing provided museum visitors with frightening imagery, such as the reference to bones, skulls and the biblical place Golgotha, which emphasized the severity of the act of disease, rather than agent, agency or purpose. Strangely, unlike the other images on the Invasion Wall, this image did not seem to reflect the quotation. Perhaps this was an attempt to realistically, rather than grandiosely, portray what likely happened – well people attempting to care for sick people, and ultimately contracting the contagion that decimated the population.



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As all six components of the Invasion Wall illuminated in red, the top and the bottom borders of the wall illuminated in red as well. Ultimately, the entire wall was lit up in white and red – colors that symbolize sickness, paleness, and blood. The lighting effect also made the rivers on the map stand out like veins in one’s arm, thus contributing to the illness symbolism. The map and the designation of place and time served to emphasize one half of the pentadic ratio that dominated the Invasion Wall: Scene. The writing, images and colors of the Invasion Wall served to emphasize the other half of the dominant pentadic ratio: Act. As Burke notes, the scene must be a “fit ‘container’ for the act,”⁶² and the New World, which had been unexposed to European diseases, was unfortunately a “fit container” for the act of disease to spread. By focusing on a scene-act ratio, the Invasion Wall portion of the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit educated visitors on the severity of the effects of disease without mentioning that American Indian civilizations were decimated because they were exposed to European diseases, to which they had no immunity, during the European invasion.

Discussion

This article has illustrated how the Invasion Wall of the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian employed a scene-act pentadic ratio in order to emphasize the devastating effect that disease had on American Indian populations throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.⁶³ However, it is important to note that the NMAI curators employed a scene-act ratio in the Invasion Wall in place of other pentadic ratios, which might have emphasized different meanings. In this case, the scene-act ratio served to explain what happened without placing blame. If the curators of the Invasion Wall had chosen to portray the information in a way that emphasized a ratio that included agent or agency, the Invasion Wall would have made a stronger, more accurate historical statement. Some scholars⁶⁴ have critiqued the museum for being relatively silent to what Lonetree describes as “the hard truths about colonization.”⁶⁵ A ratio that included the elements of “agent” or “agency” may have illustrated more clearly the role that Europeans played in the spread of disease which killed so many American Indians, but it may also have caused museum visitors of European descent to feel a sense of guilt or shame, frequently referred to as “white guilt,” which can be defined as “the dysphoria felt by European Americans who see their group as responsible for illegitimate advantage held over other racial groups.”⁶⁶ Shelby Steele notes that “white guilt” leads to the desire for “white redemption,” which is a desire (or, as Steele suggests, the appearance of this desire) by European Americans to make amends for past wrongs done by other members of their race.⁶⁷ If the Invasion Wall had focused more on an “agent,” rather than “act” or “scene,” it may have resulted in focusing more on the European invaders than on American Indians, which would have ultimately limited the American Indian empowerment message

around which the museum centers. It is likely that the curators chose to portray this part of the exhibit in the more neutral voice of the scene-act ratio in order to educate visitors without alienating European and European American visitors, and without limiting the American Indian empowerment message by taking the focus away from American Indians and placing it on European invaders.

The scene-act ratio contributed to the creation of public memory that was “activated by present concerns, issues, or anxieties,” as Dickinson, Blair and Ott state in their assumptions about public memory.⁶⁸ Museum curators were likely concerned about staying true to the museum’s mission, which seeks to simultaneously empower Native people while educating non-Native people about American Indian cultures. If the Invasion Wall had focused more on agent, it would have contradicted the museum’s mission because it would have taken focus from American Indians and placed it on Europeans, and this act may have resulted in visitors of Native descent feeling offended or visitors of European descent experiencing “white guilt.” By focusing on the act of spreading disease, rather than on the agents who spread it, the Invasion Wall was able to take a moment in history that could have conflicted and perhaps divided visitors and create what Dickinson, Blair, and Ott refer to as “communal belonging” and “shared identities.”⁶⁹ In fact, the Invasion Wall focused so much on a scene-act ratio that the title of the wall appeared to be the only overt reference to the spread of contagion by Europeans to American Indians who lacked immunity to said diseases. The rest of the wall focused entirely on where disease spread and the devastation it caused. While other parts of the exhibit, which focused on religious conversion and weaponry, may have focused on a European agent, the Invasion Wall’s focus on the act created a common enemy: disease.

Dickinson, Blair, and Ott also observe that public memory is “partial, partisan, and thus often contested.”⁷⁰ While it doesn’t appear that there was any contestation regarding the Invasion Wall, the public memory that it spurred was indeed partial and partisan. A different display focusing on agent may have emphasized how Europeans brought disease to the New World, and how their interactions with Native people, who had not built up immunity to such diseases, caused “infinite thousands” of deaths. A display focusing on agency might have emphasized the brutality of European contact with American Indians. While these possibilities would have been rooted in history, they would not have aligned with the museum’s mission and would not have created a “communal belonging”⁷¹ among visitors of all nationalities.

Through a rhetorical analysis of the Invasion Wall of the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” Exhibit in the National Museum of the American Indian, this article suggests that this section of the exhibit employed a scene-act pentadic ratio, which placed emphasis on the act of spreading disease and the locations to which disease spread. This created public memory that diminished blame and “white guilt,” thus making the wall more palatable to European American museum visitors and preventing “white guilt” from placing the emphasis on the Europeans who invaded the New World, instead of on American Indians, whom the museum seeks to empower. While an act-agent ratio or an agent-purpose ratio may have resulted in a stronger, more accurate historical statement, the implicit message of the scene-act ratio of the Invasion Wall allowed visitors to experience the exhibit in the way the museum intended: As an affirmation of “the power of indigenous Americans to represent their own lives, their own histories, their own cultures, and their own forms of knowledge.”⁷²



Photo credit: By Jeff Kubina. Website: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kubina/209598574/in/photolist-jwfmw-jwfXq-H4zy8-bPQzTD-jwffs-bAVXAU-43UNbR-bPQA9g-bAVY7h-8CySwR-hgfmKp-jwfv4-hgbYyP-5oQow8-eBeKCb-eBbvLP-69B5gd-bAVXKN-hgepN1-hgeNbh-hgeuNm-hgb5by-hgeY4L-hgf1dL-ew29fr-9jJBk-hgdVuh-bPQyWi-hgeWym-hgeYqW-6rXUAY-k7B8GF-g5vhXv-fVEa1W-hgdTnJ-hg98f2-eguh8n-hg9nCi-fTXeo8-hgg11M-hgcWNx-hgaevN-hgaaV-kf3az2Y-nAKfWn-hg8x4A-hg8jfr-hgarks-hgeGK9-hg8oUb>



Photo credit: Welcome Library London http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Native_American_medicine_man_sucking_out_disease_Wellcome_M0005860.jpg

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- ³² Kenneth Burke, “Questions and Answers about the Pentad,” *College Composition and Communication* 29 (1978): 332.
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- ³⁴ Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002): 203.
- ³⁵ The usefulness of conducting a pentadic analysis, as well as the process for doing so, is discussed in Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004): 383-410. Foss provides four steps to conducting pentadic criticism: 1) selecting an artifact, 2) analyzing the artifact, 3) formulating a research question, and 4) writing an essay. She explains that in order to analyze a rhetorical artifact using pentadic criticism, one must identify and label the terms of the pentad, and then “apply the ratios to identify the dominant term” (387).

- ³⁶ Burke's dramatic pentad has been used as a lens to study a myriad of rhetorical texts. Glenn & Enoch examined how the pentad can be used to understand how rhetoric and composition scholars perform historiography; Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch, "Drama in the Archives: Rereading Methods, Rewriting History," *College Composition & Communication* 61 (2009): 321-343. Journet studied the arguments in biologist W. D. Hamilton's representation of genetic evolution through the dramatic pentad, noting that Hamilton's rhetoric is dominated by an agent-agency metaphor; Debra Journet, "Metaphor, Ambiguity, and Motive in Evolutionary Biology: W. D. Hamilton and the 'Gene's Point of View,'" *Written Communication* 22 (2005): 379-420. In their analysis of celebrity testimony in Congressional hearings, Darr & Strine argue that a scene-act ratio drives the rhetoric of testifying celebrities, who portray their testimony as giving voice to the voiceless; Christopher R. Darr and Harry C. Strine, IV, "A Pentadic Analysis of Celebrity Testimony in Congressional Hearings," *KB Journal* 6 (2009): 1-15. Walker applied the pentad to flash mobs, noting how agent, agency, and scene play primary roles in flash mobs, with scene as the dominant component; Rebecca Walker, "Flash Flooding: A Burkean Analysis of Culture and Community in the Flash Mob," *KB Journal* 8 (2012): 1-11. Also examining the use of technology through the pentad, Bailie observes how the "smart mob" at Readington Middle School used digital technology to organize a protest commonly referred to as the "Penny Prank;" Brian Bailie, "Smart Mobs and Kenneth Burke," *KB Journal* 6 (2010): 1-8. Senda-Cook used the pentad to explore Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, concluding that "scholars should attend to the complexities, as well as the effects, of political entertainment to better understand the strategies of this powerful genre;" Samantha Senda-Cook, "Fahrenheit 9/11's Purpose-Driven Agents: A Multipentadic Approach to Political Entertainment," *KB Journal* 4 (2008): 1. One may conclude from these studies that scholars have found the pentad to be a useful tool in examining texts in many different areas of communication.
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- ⁶³ It is important to note that this article is limited in that it only examined one section of one exhibit. Future scholarship may examine how public memory is created through other exhibits, or how the Burkean dramatic pentad can be used to study meanings in other exhibits, both at the NMAI and in other museums.
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