

Legible Sovereignties: Rhetoric, Representations, and Native American Museums, by Lisa King. Oregon State University Press, 2017. 163 pp.

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As public memory and Indigenous scholarship are fast growing areas of study in composition and rhetoric (see Brown; Monberg; Morris; Ramos), work that explores the intersections therein is particularly timely. Lisa King's *Legible Sovereignties: Rhetoric, Representations, and Native American Museums* works at this intersection. King investigates the rhetorical impact of three tribal museums: the Chippewa Ziibiwing Center, Haskell Cultural Center and Museum, and the National Museum of the American Indian. Building on Scott Lyons's rhetorical sovereignty, or "the inherent right of [Indigenous] peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-50), King examines how museums legibly claim rhetorical sovereignty. That is, she is interested in how museums make their history, culture, and ways of knowing accessible or understandable to visitors. Through three chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, King argues for the importance of sites of public memory to enact sovereignty in a legible format.

The introduction of *Legible Sovereignties* lays the groundwork for the scholarship that King employs—Indigenous studies, public memory studies, and rhetoric—to examine how the three museums assert rhetorical sovereignty and, more importantly, make that sovereignty legible to an audience in a clear and sustained format. For King, the term sovereignty is flexible and meant "to encompass multiple routes and means to self-determination, and the intrinsic right of Native and Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations to self-represent in whatever means, modes, and public stages they choose as appropriate" (8). King believes that because museums have historically been colonized institutions, balancing sovereignty with audience reception is key to working within traditional understandings of museums and honoring Indigenous culture and history. Therefore, King dedicates her book to analyzing rhetorically the museums' displays in order to extrapolate the legibility of their discursive practices. This method includes a consideration of the effect on the audience and the tensions between the tribes' intentions and the museums' representations.

After establishing an analytical framework, chapter one analyzes the legibility of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan's Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways near Mount Pleasant. King begins by describing the displays, mission statement and narrative of the Ziibiwing Center. She focuses on the choices the museum made to assert Saginaw Chippewa voices

and to help make their sovereignty accessible to a diverse audience. She details the museum's aesthetic, architectural, and linguistic elements, analyzing each in relation to how they represent and express Anishinabe culture and history to visitors. King also considers the ways museums and cultural centers rhetorically shape and influence the world around them by analyzing the cultural events at the museum and their connections to the surrounding community. For the Ziibiwing Center, public outreach includes cultural celebrations and collaborations with the local university, even if the surrounding community has not always historically welcomed or honored the tribe. Overall, King finds that Ziibiwing has a rich cultural heritage that not only independently voices their own history and modern day contributions to the community but also challenges former adversaries to learn about the tribe.

In chapter two, King analyzes an intertribal college museum, the Haskell Cultural Center and Museum (HCCM) at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. Her reading of HCCM is more complex than the Ziibiwing Center, as HCCM not only represents multiple tribes but also has an admittedly complicated past and present relationship with the government. According to King, Haskell University's origins are deeply embedded in colonial practices since its beginning as a boarding school for young Native children. In 2002, the campus community and surrounding neighborhood paid considerable attention to HCCM's grand opening. King highlights this attention by examining students' active participation in creating displays and hosting opening ceremonies. Further, she underscores several distinct challenges to HCCM's articulation of sovereignty after the initial fanfare of its opening. After a few years, student and community involvement declined and HCCM struggled to maintain adequate funding. King maps out ways HCCM continued to struggle to make their sovereignty rhetorically legible despite a lack of fiscal support. HCCM also updated their mission statement and added a new display in order to meet the communicative needs of the community. These changes struggled to integrate coherently the new and old displays within the existing space and failed to attract more visitors, raising questions their rhetorical success. While other museums may face similar struggles, King believes that a lack of funding instigated HCCM's problems. She expands legible sovereignties to include adequate fiscal support as a foundation for successful rhetorical display.

King's third chapter examines the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. According to King, upon its inaugural opening, the NMAI challenged traditional Western museum and display conventions in more overt ways than do HCCM and the Ziibiwing Center. NMAI seeks to challenge viewers' concept of Native Americans as antiques of the past by using a nonchronological organization and by celebrating differences of tribes across North and South America. King points out that the nonlinear,

noncontrolling narrative that the museum employed upon opening was met with mixed reviews and left the majority of the visitors confused and unsure what to think. As a result, King argues that the initial opening of the NMAI failed to make intertribal rhetorical sovereignty legible to visitors. This tension between the communicative goal of the museum and audience interpretation is the primary purpose behind rhetorically legible sovereignty. For King, a balance between rhetorical intent and audience reception is essential for achieving successful self-representation. Several years after its opening, the NMAI responded to these critiques and provided a friendlier atmosphere for children and individuals who know little about Native Americans. King argues that this shift does not mean that the museum abandoned Native meaning making practices, but instead highlights the way the museum acknowledged the complicated relationship between rhetorical effectiveness, museums, and visitors.

The conclusion puts the struggles and accomplishments of the three museums in conversation with one another. King helps the reader to recognize patterns of decision making, visitor response, and community involvement of established by the three institutions. King's analysis identifies strategies tribal museums use to make their sovereignty legible in relation to diverse audiences. To communicate indigenous self-determination, King highlights the ways each museum uniquely struggled to create a legible message that would reach both tribal and nontribal visitors through cultural displays. As the Ziibiwing Center, HCCM, and NMAI employed unique methods in creating legible displays, she argues that because sovereignty is highly localized, different museums will make their sovereignties legible using distinct methods. King underscores that this process is ongoing and that tensions will always exist. Museums will continually need to consider audiences and combat colonizing histories endemic to such institutions. Attention to the museum's legibility opens opportunities to understand the representation of "the involved Native community the way it wishes to be understood" (King 162).

Overall, *Legible Sovereignties: Rhetoric, Representations, and Native American Museums* demonstrates the ongoing struggle for rhetorical sovereignty and the role museums play in articulating and educating the public. King weaves together three fields of study to reveal the need to understand how tribal museums are constructed, the message they hope to and do convey, and the ways a community can be changed and influenced by their presence. She attunes the audience to the intricate and complex meaning making processes a museum must consider, underscoring their potential as sites that challenge Western ideological practices. I recommend *Legible Sovereignties* primarily to scholars interested in public memory and Indigenous studies and secondarily to museum connoisseurs who seek insight into tribal museums and the cultural work they perform. In this regard, chapter three on the NMAI is most compelling in its

focus on audience response as key to making effective changes. King considers the audiences' varied responses and shows how NMAI directly responded to these critiques by recomposing the displays for diverse audiences.

This response is important for composition and rhetoric as it models ways an academic analysis connects to cultural institutions. King provides insightful analyses of the museums, and it becomes clear that the "legibility" of a museum necessitates an audience that understands the museum's rhetorical message. She includes information from newspapers as well as interviews with curators and authors to show the museum's intent and general reception; however, the concrete ways museums can and do collect audience feedback to inspire effective change would further the supposition that understanding rhetorical legibility of a museum increases the overall message of sovereignty. Nonetheless, King lays the foundation for future work in understanding the relationship between sites of public memory, history, and continued community involvement, especially in relation to Native American history, culture, and rhetorical practices.

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Works Cited

Lyons, Scott Richard. "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What do American Indians Want from Writing?" *CCC*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, pp. 447-68.