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Exhibit Review: In|Dignity

By Maia Matheu

Anthropology is often considered the study of man, but more accurately, it is the study of humanity as a whole. In order to understand what it means to be human, anthropology delves into the linguistic, cultural, biological, and archaeological processes of culture. The In|Dignity exhibit represents an exceptionally clever, multidisciplinary effort to use the tools of anthropology to explore the vast diversity of human culture, while simultaneously confronting discrimination. The title of the exhibit itself embodies the dueling themes of dignity and indignity, shedding light on the broad range of diverse as well as unique identities found within cultures, explored through personal narratives concerning discrimination and prejudice, empowerment and self-respect. The theme of diversity is showcased throughout the exhibit from the life experiences explored and the people behind these stories, to displays along the walls of the museum. Real-life experiences of racism and heterosexism, as well as moments of pride and accomplishment are showcased through the personal testimony of Inland Empire residents who were interviewed as part of the project. By showcasing the trials and triumphs of these Inland Empire residents, the exhibit seeks to connect communities and dissolve the barriers of discrimination.

The Anthropology Museum is located on the third floor of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Before entering the museum, visitors are greeted by an introductory display that outlines the exhibit and its intended purpose, along with the title, portrait, and a brief biography of each of the people featured in the exhibit. The statements, “Look me in the eyes. See beyond the stereotype. Embrace my humanity,” assist in reinforcing the concept of looking past labels and prejudices while exploring the exhibit. These three statements are short, to the point, and more importantly, full of heartfelt honesty that participants in this exhibit wish visitors to keep in mind. Walking into the exhibit, a sense of peace, openness, and tranquility seemingly fills the area. This effect pervades the space and is achieved by the location of the museum, near the quiet end of a third-floor hallway, and through the color scheme and glass windows, which provide natural and fresh lighting. Tall, white panels containing messages from Inland
Empire residents are constructed around the gallery space to form makeshift hallways and twining corridors. Each panel holds a framed photograph of a participant that hangs near the top of the panel. Beneath this is the printed text of their story and a large close-up print of the participant’s face. There is a deliberate contrast between the framed photograph and the print of the person below. The photograph displays a formal, proper, and guarded pose while the print below the text reveals a speaker with their faces light-hearted and filled with joy. This light-hearted emotion resonates from each speaker while the placement of the print suggests that the act of sharing their experience eases the heavy weight of the indignities suffered. Being vulnerable and sharing these personal experiences enables museum visitors to know, understand, and perhaps start a change within themselves and in their communities.

The use of the narrator’s photographs, audio excerpts for each speaker, and written text flowing along the white panel walls permit visitors to form deep and profound connections to each individual featured in the exhibit. And with greater empathy comes greater understanding and with this, the exhibit creates bonds between people and reduces barriers. The exhibit is divided into seven thematic sections, each of which is assigned a color. This thematic color-coordination is found in the script of the white panels. In this way, the panels are easily grouped, and visitors keep the current theme of each section in mind as they make their way along. The themes listed are: Petrified, involving stories of preconceived notions of groups/people; Embodied, stories exploring how bodies can bind or free individuals; Color Lines, how color can be used to divide or unite. Stones May Rot, examining how words can affect; Invisible, stories of being ignored and hidden; I Raise Up My Voice, exploring the experiences of societal expectations upon women and redefining these expectations; and finally, Empower, which considers experiences of support and wisdom.

The museum also employs hands-on activities to encourage visitor participation and comprehension. One of these activities is found at the front of the museum on a wooden bookstand containing “concept cards” that visitors can carry with them as they move around the museum. These cards assist in interpreting large ideas that are often misunderstood in our society by breaking them down to promote better comprehension. They also contain
diagrams relating to these concepts, a list of narratives in the gallery that communicates this concept, and a critical-thinking section regarding the concept. As of now, the museum has seven types of concept cards: Immigration, Stereotypes, Intersectionality, Identity, Discrimination, Criminal Justice, and #MeToo. Through this interactive exercise, visitors have an opportunity to broaden their minds and connect with the panelists as they address these concepts. The critical-thinking section is important here as it allows the visitor to consider and apply what they take away from the experience of a concept card.

Another activity the museum incorporates is a selfie station. This station has two segments. One side painted black and the other painted white. In the corner of the white wall, there is a wooden stand with small carved birds and branches that holds several long strips of black cloth. The black wall lists directions for the selfie station and what to do with the black cloth. The cloth is a blindfold, and the black wall becomes a background for visitors to take a picture of themselves wearing blindfolds. On the wall, there are photographs of people with a black bar obscuring their eyes. Although unique, the selfie station’s intended message is confusing, the black cloth could be interpreted as symbolic of the idea that the character of an individual cannot be judged by physical appearance alone. Alternatively, concealing the eyes could be interpreted as obscuring an individual’s soul. Regardless of the intended message, at the top of the selfie station there is a quote in Spanish saying, “Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semilla,” which is translated as “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know that we were seeds.” Unfortunately, as experienced, the quote and the selfie participation concept struggle to relate and connect to each other in any meaningful way. The quote pairs well with the exhibit as a whole, but it seems entirely unrelated to the selfie station.

This museum strives to connect people of multiple backgrounds and communities through the shared personal experience of indignities and empowerment of Inland Empire residents. The exhibit employs a variety of methods to assist visitors in forming connections through the visual representation of participants, hearing the voices of these participants, supporting material along the walls that relate to their stories, and hands-on learning experiences. In this way, the space within this museum becomes a protective place where meaningful connections may be
formed between visitors and participants from all walks of life in a manner that is respectful, empathetic, and beautiful in its humanity.

Author Bio

Maia Matheu graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and double minors in American Indian Studies and Classics from California State University, Long Beach. She is currently pursuing her Master’s Degree in Applied Archaeology at California State University, San Bernardino. She has participated on archaeological projects concerning Californian, Mesoamerican, and Classical archaeology. Besides digging in the ground, her academic interests include the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and museum studies. After graduation, she plans to enter the Cultural Resource Management workforce and keep the option of pursuing a PhD open.